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NEW YORK

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THE

THE SPECTER RIDERS;
SPECTER RIDERS;

OR,

THE FORT MYSTERY.

(No. 268.)

BY GEORGE GLEASON.

NEW YORK:

BEADLE AND ADAMS, PUBLISHERS,

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THE SPECTER RIDERS.

CHAPTER I.

CHASED TO DEATH.

THERE is a thrilling excitement in a race on the open prairie at any time; but when the race occurs in the dead hour of night, and the stakes are a human life, the excitement is doubly intense.

It was a wild March night. There was a moon in the sky, but the black scudding clouds sailed across its disk every moment, making checkers of light and shadow on the prairie below. A high wind, coming out of the lowering west, swept with unrestrained fury to the eastward, whistling gleefully as it rushed through leafless groves, and making unearthly noises as it hovered round solitary dwellings of men and beasts.

Caught up by the driving winds, and borne for miles along its course, came the swift clatter of horses' hoofs, faint yet distinct.

The rider—or riders, for there evidently were more than one—seemed putting their animals to the test. At a dangerous rate they dashed through moonlight and darkness, as if driven irresistibly before the furious gale. Who could they be? And what could be the cause of this reckless, headlong race, at such a time and place?

The pounding of hoofs on the hard turf grew louder and louder.

Now they come in sight. What! only *one* horseman? Only one appears, but there are others behind him, distinctly heard yet still invisible. At this moment the moon is shining unobscured. Its tempered light falls upon the leading horseman, and discloses him to our view. He is a young man, not over twenty-five years of age, handsomely formed,

and by no means ill-looking in the face; he is mounted upon a powerful, snow-white charger, his body leaning forward over the proudly-arched neck, his head half turned, and his eyes gazing intently over his shoulder.

Clad in hunter's garb, a rifle rests across the pommel of his saddle, which he clutches tightly with one hand, while the other holds the reins.

The pursuers were probably Indians, although, from any sound that came from them, it was not plain that they were such. They uttered no whoop nor cry—in fact, made no noise whatever. They seemed hushed into silence by their eager intentness, as they followed close in the white man's rear. He could see them only at intervals, when the clouds overhead were thinnest, and then just plainly enough to be certain that the number of his pursuers were three.

"Courage, brave Cherokee!" murmured the young hunter, patting the smooth, snowy neck of his steed. "Courage, my noble fellow, and we'll leave the red devils far behind. They are pressing us hard, but I have yet to find your equal in a race."

As if proud of his master's praise, and determined to merit it, the intelligent brute stretched out his beautiful limbs, and shot forward with long, easy bounds, his nostrils distended, and his eyes flashing with defiance. The magnificent play of his powerful muscles, and the superb grace of his movements, would have excited the admiration of any one who could have seen him then.

On they thundered, swift as swallows on the wing, the wind roaring behind them as if trying in vain to distance the racers.

"I wish my rifle was loaded," said the hunter to himself; "I think I could reduce the number of my enemies to two. But I was careless enough to leave it unloaded after shooting that turkey. I wonder why they don't bring me out of my saddle? I believe they could do it, but I suppose they want to capture me. Faster, Cherokee! They are struggling desperately to overtake us. Go! go! Show them what you are made of."

The noble animal did show what he was made of. Conscious of his master's peril, he seemed to strain every nerve

in his behalf, and the distance between him and his pursuers began to increase more rapidly than before.

"Ha! they will soon give up the chase now."

In a few minutes the pursuers were entirely out of sight, but the clattering hoof-strokes told that they had not relinquished the chase. On they came, with unabated speed, and yet they gave no whoop or yell, as evidence of their eagerness or determination.

But, just as the brave winner of the race was carrying his rider safely out of the danger into which he had fallen—just as his rider began to stroke his mane with affectionate pride, and tell him he had done nobly—the fleet-footed courser stumbled and pitched headlong to the ground!

The young man felt himself flying swiftly through the air one moment; the next, he struck the earth with a violence that almost stunned him.

But he quickly sprung to his feet, though he felt that he was severely bruised. It was very dark now; the thick, black clouds shut out all light from above, and the wind was blowing fiercely and steadily. The savages were still in hot pursuit. Their horses' hoofs were beating the earth as rapidly as ever. In one minute they would be on the spot, and then—

More alarmed now than he had been before, the hunter bent over his horse and struck him smartly with his open hand.

"Up, Cherokee! Rise! rise! Quick! or I am lost! The Indians are almost upon us. My God! is he dead?"

No, he was not dead. He made one attempt to rise, but sunk back again, and lay as motionless as a heap of snow.

The race was over. The white steed was certainly winner, but now he must be stripped of his laurels by treachery.

The young man glanced hurriedly around. It would be folly to attempt to escape on foot, and, besides, he could not think of leaving his faithful horse to fall into the hands of the savages. He snatched up his rifle, but dropped it again immediately.

"It is empty," he cried, stamping his foot. "Curse my negligence in leaving it unloaded! Ha! the pistols! Why have I not thought of them before?"

He bent down, and drew a brace of large pistols from the holster of his saddle. Standing astride of his fallen horse, and holding one of the weapons in each hand, he pointed them at the approaching horsemen.

In a moment the pursuers were in sight. He saw them looming up darkly before him, as they came dashing recklessly on, their long robes flaunting in the wind.

There was not a second to lose. His aim was deadly, as his fingers pressed the triggers. Bang! went both the pistols at once, and the double report rung out loud and startling.

For an instant there was a cessation of sounds. Then there was a plunging and snorting of frightened horses, a shrill neigh of affright, a confused pounding of hoofs, and the terrified animals swerved to the right and galloped away.

But, just as they turned, the clouds overhead parted, and the earth was flooded with the mellow moonlight, which seemed even more brilliant than before, after the darkness. At the very moment the light burst forth, the pursuers were in the act of changing their course, and were sweeping round directly in front of the hunter's eyes.

He staggered back with a cry of amazement and terror. The pistols dropped from his hands, the pallor of death overspread his face, and the blood seemed turning to ice in his veins. God of heaven! what was this he saw?

There were three horses, wild-looking and steaming with perspiration, and upon the back of every horse sat a *human skeleton*, partially concealed by a long white sheet flying out behind, each skeleton holding the reins, and sitting erect like a living man!

CHAPTER II.

OLD ADAM GRIFF.

LONG before the young man recovered from his surprise and horror, the ghastly spectacle had vanished, and yet he stood there, gazing with dilated eyes at the darkness which had swallowed it up.

Human skeletons on horseback! How could he believe it, even after seeing them? It would be simply impossible to describe the sensations that were his at that moment—the icy chills creeping over him; the difficulty he experienced in breathing; the momentary suspension, we might almost say, of life. He had never before heard of such a thing. What could it mean? Had he really seen the awful phenomenon? or was it some wild phantasy of a disordered brain, caused by the shock of his recent fall? Hardly the latter, he thought, for in the fall his head had entirely escaped, and his brain was perfectly clear. There was not the slightest tinge of superstition in his nature, but it must be confessed that at this moment, while under the influence of excitement occasioned by the horrible apparition, he believed those skeletons were moved by the agency of spirits. How else could he account for their strange appearance at such a time and place, and in so wonderful a manner? But when he could no longer hear the sound of the retreating horses, and the first shock of astonishment and horror was over, he banished all superstitious ideas resolutely, notwithstanding the inexplicability of the mystery.

“I saw it,” he mused, “that much is certain, and I could take my oath that it is no freak of the imagination. But the fact that *I* am mystified is no assurance that it can not be explained.”

“Hello, thar! Is that you, Edward Westlake?”

The young man wheeled round, and stood on the defensive.

There, in the moonlight, sitting on the back of an old raw-boned mare, was a man, old and rawboned too, though evidently good for many more years of activity. His hair and beard were gray, his face rugged and weatherbeaten, his eyes bright and piercing as an eagle’s, his figure lank and slightly crooked, and his left hand minus a thumb. A white scar, running diagonally across his forehead, extended from the roots of his hair to his right eyebrow; his nose was disfigured by a large hairy mole, which occupied one side of it near the end; a long yellow tooth, or snag, was perpetually visible, protruding over his lower lip whenever he closed his mouth; and he had a way of holding his head constantly on

one side, like an artist standing off to view his work. He wore an outfit of dirty buck-skin, the leggins fitting almost as tight as the skin, and looking very much as though they had never been taken off since the day they had been put on, which, undoubtedly, was at no recent date.

"Blow me ef it *ain't* Edward Westlake!" added the old hunter, when the other turned toward him.

"Adam Griff, as surely as I live!" returned the young man, grasping his hand and giving it a hearty shake.

"You're 'bout right thar, youngster, ef you never war afore," said the old individual, in his rough, drawling voice. "I'm Adam Griff, sure's shootin', and hain't been nobody else fur sixty years and up'ards."

"And what are you doing here?"

"Now that ar' is jist what I war on the p'int of axin' you. I'm not doin' nothin'; you *have* been, I calc'late."

Edward Westlake picked up his rifle and pistols in silence.

"I war squattin' over yender in a holler," continued Adam Griff, "and I was waked up by the noise of gallopin' hosses. I jumped onto old Sarah Jane's back then, and when I heerd that tremendous shot, which war like half a dozen rifles goin' off to onc't, I started this way. Sunkthin' out of the usual course of events must have happened, youngster, 'cause I rid right up 'thout 'tractin' yer attention, and I never knowed you to be so keerless afore."

"Yes, something extraordinary *has* occurred."

"I'd 'a' swore to it. Whar's yer hoss?"

"Why, don't you see him? He is lying here on the ground."

"Everlastin' thunder! that ain't Cherokee?"

"It is."

"Yer don't mean to say he's dead?"

"I hope he isn't, but I fear he is hurt. He was on a full gallop when he stumbled and fell. He isn't able to rise. will you give me your assistance?"

"Will I?" The request was no sooner made than one of Adam Griff's long, dangling legs beat the air, as he swung it over his mare's neck and slid to the ground.

"I hope he's not gone under, 'cause I'll sw'ar right straight up an' down thar ain't a better hoss on the plains."

"Well, he isn't dead," said the young man, bending over the prostrate animal. "It remains to be seen whether he is hurt severely or not."

To their joy and surprise, however, they discovered that the horse had sustained no injury, except a very slight cut on one knee. His fall had been caused by the long lariat which his master invariably carried, one end of which had become disengaged from the saddle bow and dropped to the ground. His legs becoming entangled in this, he had been brought low at the very moment he was receiving his master's praise, as winner of the race.

The lariat was quickly removed from his limbs, and the proud steed was soon on his feet again.

"There," said Edward Westlake, fondly patting the arched neck. "My brave Cherokee is himself once more."

"See hyur, Edward, I want to know what in all creation made you ride so fast?" the trapper demanded, passing his hand over the smooth coat of the steaming horse. "Injuns been arter you?"

"No," was the laconic response.

"What then? Thar was more hosses nor your'n on the rampage, 'cause I heerd 'em."

"I was pursued, but not by Indians."

"Yer don't tell me so? War they pale-faces?"

"No."

"Hey? Warn't neither red-skins nor pale-faces? That trumps me, hanged ef it don't. Durn it, Edward, what sort of fellers did you have on yer trail, ef they was neither white nor red?"

Edward shuddered and turned away.

"You would not believe me if I should tell you," he muttered, the moonlight showing that he was quite pale and nervous.

A strange expression appeared on the rugged face of the old trapper.

He took a step forward, and gave his companion a keen, searching look.

"I understand you, my boy," said he, with emphasis, as he laid one of his brawny hands on Edward's shoulder. "I understand you now. *You've see'd the Specter Riders!*"

Young Westlake started violently, and stared at the speaker in astonishment.

"How know you that?" he asked, quickly.

"I see it in yer face," was the reply.

"And did *you* ever see these skeleton's?"

"See'd 'em yesterday, fur the fust time. It was in broad daylight, but they was half a mile away, and I didn't keer 'bout gittin' nearer."

"Did you ever hear of them before?"

"Never did."

The young hunter was perplexed. If the startling spectacle had not been presented to other eyes than his own, he thought he might have arrived at the conclusion, eventually, that he had been deceived by a momentary disorder of the intellect. But, as it was, he could think no more of discarding the evidence of his senses.

"It is a very singular phenomenon," he said, musingly. "I never heard anything so strange."

"This beaver never did, that's sartin," said Adam Griff.

"What do you think they *are*, Adam?"

"Why, bless yer gizzard, they're *sperrits*, in course!"

"Bah!" returned the other, disdainfully; "I do not believe they are spirits. Preposterous!"

"You're green, youngster. Do you think they're human bein's riding round the kentry, with no flesh on thar bones?"

"Of course not. It is quite evident that there is no life, either earthly or spiritual, in those naked bones."

The old hunter broke into a low laugh, revealing the solitary snag to its roots.

"Sometimes I think you're powerful cute," said he, "but I'll be shot if you ain't greener'n hammered elm, arter all. Ef thar's no life in them bones, how do they set up on the horses so straight, and ride about jist like livin' men?"

"I can not tell. I do not pretend to understand it, but I think there is no supernatural agency in the affair."

"Thar's jist whar we differ. I think thar is. Ef the Specter Riders ain't sperrits, they ain't nothin'. Let 'em git hold of you once't, and I'll bet you'll have your peepers opened."

"You are not afraid of them, Adam?"

"Thar's no mortal ever lived that old Adam Griff 'ud show the white feather to, but hyur's what don't want a great deal to do with them as don't putend to be mortal."

"You believe in ghosts, then?"

At this the old borderer seemed to hesitate, as if uncertain whether to answer evasively, or make a confession.

"You believe in ghosts?" repeated his companion.

"Wal, Edward, maybe I do," he replied.

Edward smiled.

"I believe you said you first saw these mysterious horse-men, yesterday?" he inquired, after a pause.

"That's what I said."

"And had never heard of them before?"

"Jist so."

"Have you told anybody about it?"

"Sartin. Went right to the fort with the story."

"How did they receive it?"

"Wal, they knows I ain't in the habit of lyin', so you may stake yer ha'r that it made consid'able excitement."

"Did you find any one that had seen the specters?"

"Nary one. The story war new to all that heerd it."

"Their advent in this neighborhood must be quite recent."

There was silence for some minutes after this. Then Edward Westlake spoke again.

"When did you leave Fort Binkley?" he asked.

"This mornin'," returned the trapper. "Been tryin' the hull day to git another squint at them spooks, but didn't git it. Goin' to start back in the mornin'."

"Good! We will go together. How did you leave the people? How are old Colonel Howrth and—and—daughter?"

"The kurnel are the same old kurnel el'ar through, and as fur Marian—wal, thar's no change in her, onless she's got purtier."

A soft flush dyed the tanned cheek of the stalwart young hunter.

"I will see her to-morrow," he murmured, to himself, and then added, aloud: "By the way, has Dean Potter turned up

yet? or, has any trace of him been discovered in my absence?"

"Nary trace," answered Griff; "but thar's more bad news. Since you went away two other fellers have been missin'. They sloped in the same onsartin way that Potter did."

"Two other fellows disappeared!" exclaimed Westlake, in astonishment. "Who are they?"

"Simon Dawes, and Joe Crampton."

"And the manner of their disappearance is veiled in mystery, just as Dean Potter's is?"

"Exactly. Nobody kin tell a word about 'em—nobody knows whar to look fur 'em—nobody knows whether they went of thar own accord, or somebody else's accord."

"It is very strange. When will wonders cease?"

We will not follow them further in their conversation. Suffice it to say that they stood there for some time longer, talking principally upon subjects which we prefer to introduce at a later period of our narrative; after which the two hunters found a spot partially sheltered from the driving wind, and laid them down to sleep.

CHAPTER III.

SOLOMON, THE INDIAN DWARF.

FORT BINKLEY was one of those frontier posts which the United States Government has scattered over the broad prairies lying west of the Mississippi. In its construction, this fort was not different from the majority of those to be found upon the western border—with its stout pickets, its wooden bastions, its ditch surrounding all, and its loopholes for musketry. Inside were the block-houses and soldiers' quarters, and other buildings used for the protection of stores: and, high above the tallest structure, the beautiful flag of our country unfurled its glorious stripes and stars, and floated proudly over the fort.

Several small cannon were planted in the rude bastions, and

these, in addition to other advantages of strength and location, made it a formidable object to hostile Indians.

The garrison consisted of about two hundred men, and the officer in command was one Colonel Howarth, a sturdy old soldier who bore the scars of many battles, and who was as gentle and tender-hearted in peace as he was brave and invincible in war. He was invariably liked as soon as he was met, and, perhaps, a man more worthy in every respect, never filled an important position in Uncle Sam's service.

Colonel Howarth had a daughter, who lived with him at the fort—a modest, lovely girl, who had but recently arrived at the age of eighteen years, and who was the pride and pet of the garrison. Her name was Marian. Her beauty was of a type universally admired, made up of lips like ripe cherries, complexion clear and slightly olive-tinted, features faultlessly and delicately cut, hair wavy, luxuriant and dark as a Gipsy's, with lustrous eyes that were changeable in hue, at one time gray, and at another intensely black.

It was the day succeeding the night whose events we have just described, and a day so mild and pleasant that it seemed to belong to the month of May instead of March. The beautiful scenery around Fort Binkley was clad in a sheen of golden sunshine, and the few birds who were thus early welcoming the approach of spring, pealed forth their merry carols from tree and bush.

Early in the afternoon, Marian Howarth went out for a walk, as was her custom when the weather was propitious. With her dark, flowing hair forming a frame round her sunny, dimpled face—with her eyes sparkling like diamonds, and her broad-brimmed hat casting a gentle shade over her features—she looked more like a Gipsy now than ever, tripping airily along the winding prairie-path, which she always followed in her rambles.

Presently she turned the corner of a huge bluff that rose abruptly from the plain. In another minute the fort was hidden from view, by the long ledges of rock which she had placed between it and herself. Here was the end of her walk.

With a promptness that betrayed a previous knowledge of its existence, she found a pretty, retired nook; and there

sat down to rest, and muse, and view the romantic scenery around her. She pushed back her hat, and allowed the soft breeze to toy with her silken tresses, while her eyes grew more and more dreamy in their gaze as she gradually lost herself in the enchantment of a delightful reverie. A half-hour passed thus, and then, with a deep-drawn sigh, she came out of the bright realms of fairy-land, to find herself once more enshrouded by the cold realities of a less fantastic world.

After glancing about, in a bewildered sort of a manner, like one waking from a dream, she broke into a merry, rippling laugh.

"How my imagination runs away with me!" she said, to herself. "I never sit down here but my fancy begins to construct castles in the air, and I wander amid fairy bowers, charmed into sweet contentment by the fancied scene around me. Ha! ha! ha! am I in love? Ah! *am I?*" She held out her little left hand, and looked blushing at the circlet of gold which sparkled on the fore-finger. "Yes, yes; I *am* in love," she murmured, "and I care not if the whole world knows it; for who can say my affections have been misplaced? His mother gave him this ring, on her death-bed, and no power on earth can induce me to violate the sacred vows it seals. No! no! I'll be true to him forever!"

She paused, and picked up a small piece of soapstone, fragments of which were lying profusely around. With this she began to mark something on the smooth face of the rock beside her. At first she used it carelessly and mechanically, but soon her whole attention became engrossed in her work, and her eyes kindled with interest as she formed character after character with skill and precision.

Presently she stopped, blushed deeply, and cast the fragment of stone away. But she had formed a name on the side of the rock, and that name was EDWARD WESTLAKE.

"There is the name of my love," she whispered, as if imparting a secret to some one; "and a nobler, truer-hearted man never lived. Let—me—see; it has been just a fortnight since he went away, and he told me at parting that he would be back in that time. It seems an age since I saw

him last. Dear, dear ! I wish father would send some one else on these dangerous missions to the Indian tribes. But then, the selection of Edward on nearly every occasion of this kind, reflects much credit upon his bravery and skill."

Just as the girl ceased speaking, she started and looked quickly around. She had heard a sound, so low as to be deceptive, and she could neither guess whence it came nor what had caused it. In a moment she heard it again. This time she was prepared for it, and knew that it came from some point above her. She cast her eyes upward. What she saw was a brown, half-clad figure, clambering nimbly down the rocks from the summit of the ledge. It was directly over her, and rapidly nearing the spot where she was sitting.

At first she was inclined to be frightened, as she saw that the approaching figure was that of an Indian. But a second look relieved her of her uneasiness, for in it she recognized the intruder. It was a little, ugly, dwarfish, weazen-faced Indian, whom she had often seen lounging about the fort, and who was known among the whites by the Christian appellation of Solomon. Little attention was paid to him by the soldiers, except at times when they wanted to make use of him, and then he showed himself ever ready to work, provided he received a remuneration for his services.

As nothing was to be feared from this person, Marian Howarth did not move.

The agile dwarf leaped from the rocks above, and struck the ground a few feet in front of her.

She supposed he would walk away then, and leave her to resume the train of thoughts he had caused her to drop. But, instead of that, he stopped there, folded his arms across his breast, and stood looking at her in silence. She glanced up at him indignantly, but the words that were on her tongue seemed to freeze in her mouth, as her eyes met his. The black, bead-like orbs of the Indian were fastened upon her with a look of demoniac triumph, and glittering like those of a serpent. His dark, weazen face fairly gleamed with an expression of greediness and exultation, and his whole bearing was that of one who sees a favorable consummation of a darling scheme. His stunted body was bent forward,

giving him the appearance of a wild beast preparing to spring upon its prey.

In surprise and alarm Marian receded involuntarily.

"Ugh!" grunted the savage; "white maiden all alone?"

"Yes," she replied; "I am alone, and wish to remain so."

"White maiden beautiful," continued the savage, without moving. "Much nice hair—smooth cheek—red lip. Ugh! Solomon like de kurnel's daughter—great like."

This declaration and the look that accompanied it, caused Marian some uneasiness; but she determined to conceal the fact from him as long as possible.

"Solomon will please go away," she said, calmly. "I prefer to be alone."

"T'ink lots of kurnel's daughter—can't leave," grinned the little wretch, as he began to rub his shriveled hands together.

"I *command* you to leave!" exclaimed the girl, angrily.

"No like command. Not go."

"I will report on you, and father will have you punished."

"Wagh! kurnel nebber know 'bout it. You nebber tell him. You nebber see him ag'in!"

"Never see him again? Solomon, I fear you are drunk."

"No drink a drop. No hab rum. Much, awful sober."

Marian was perplexed.

"Why are you here?" she demanded.

"Foller you," was the cool response.

"And why did you follow me?"

"Find out soon enough. Goin' to carry you off. Kurnel's daughter nebber go back to fort. She my captive. Go with me—go 'way off with me."

Marian began to grow pale. There could be no doubt that he really meant to carry her away! What could she do? He was certainly equal to the task, for, though small of stature, he was muscular in the extreme.

And why did he wish to do this? Before to-day he had never appeared to notice her, and she thought him perfectly harmless, as, indeed, he had hitherto proved to be.

"Why do you wish to take me away from my home and father?" she asked. "I never knew you were so wicked. I

thought you were a good man, who never harmed helpless women."

This apparently had some effect upon the Indian. He hesitated, and was clearly confused for some moments; then he said:

"Solomon no wicked. He do dis for gold. Udder man hire him to do it."

"Another man hires you! In the name of Heaven, *who*?"

"Much bad man—pale-face."

"Oh, God! what does all this mean? Are you speaking the truth? Tell me the name of this man."

"He name is Turk Redby."

"*Turk Redby!*" gasped Marian.

She sunk back, pale and trembling, as she repeated that name, and sat there staring at the dwarf, unable to utter another word.

Now was the Indian's time. He saw how weak and helpless she was rendered by the information he had given her, and recognized it as the moment for action.

Like a tiger he leaped forward. With his right hand he grasped both of her wrists, and held them like a vise, while he threw his left around her waist; and in this manner he began to drag her away from the spot.

CHAPTER IV.

A RUSH TO THE RESCUE.

MARIAN found her voice in a twinkling.

"Help! help! help!" she screamed, as she made a feeble effort to free her hands. "Help! oh, help!"

The Indian stopped and scowled upon her.

"Mustn't scream!" he hissed, with his mouth close to her ear. "No scream ag'in. Me kill—me chop head open!"

"Help! help! help!" cried the girl, without heeding the threat, and her voice rung out loud and clear.

The Indian shook her angrily.

"Stop scream!" he commanded. "Nobody come. Me put sumkin' ober white maiden's mouth, if she no be still."

At that instant they both heard the clear ring of a horse's hoofs on the rocky earth, accompanied by a hoarse shout from some unseen person.

Then a powerful white steed darted into view like a flash of lightning. There was another shout—the beautiful animal halted as suddenly as he had appeared, and a young man leaped from his back almost before he stopped.

"Back, miserable wretch!" thundered an imperative voice. "Unhand that girl, or by Heaven you die a dog's death!"

There was a quick blow, dealt by a heavy fist; a cry of affright, and the savage fell as if he were shot.

But he bounded to his feet again like India rubber, and with a series of sharp yelps, in which fear, pain and anger were combined, he darted out of sight like a hunted hare.

It was all over in a space of time so incredibly short that the girl could scarcely realize that it had truly occurred, until a strong arm encircled her unresisting form, and she felt her head resting upon the broad, manly bosom of her lover.

"Marián, darling!"

"Dear Edward!"

She looked up into his handsome, flushed face, and received the tender kiss which he stooped to imprint on her ripe red lips.

"Oh, Edward! I am so glad you have come," she said.

"Indeed, my little girl, I am inclined to think my coming was very opportune on this occasion," was the laughing response, as that rough brown hand gently smoothed back her disordered tresses.

"It was, truly," she replied. "You came just in time to save me from—from—"

She paused, shuddered, and the blushes left her cheeks.

"From what, love?"

"From a horrible captivity—if nothing worse."

"Not so bad as that, I hope," he returned, cheerfully; "though I can not guess why that little imp should wish to molest you. I always thought he was a peaceable sort of a fellow. But never mind; the scoundrel shall be punished if he has the audacity to return to the fort after this.

Ah! I had entirely forgotten that I was accompanied by Adam Griff."

Marian looked quickly around, and the first thing she saw was the old trapper, sitting on the back of his rawboned mare, looking at them with calm indifference, with his head on one side.

"I kinder thought I'd slipped yer re-collect," said he, with his low laugh, in which his ugly tooth was laid bare. "Least-wise, yer didn't seem to pay much 'tention to me."

As he said this he threw one of his long legs over the animal's neck, and dropped to the ground.

"We heerd you screechin' as we come along," he continued, walking up to the young couple with long, awkward strides, and looking at the girl as he spoke. "We heerd you screechin' fur help, and the youngster thar he shot ahead like a streak of greased lightnin', leavin' me and old Sarah Jane behind."

"Not far behind, however," remarked Edward.

"Wal, not fur, that's a fact," admitted the scout. "Sarah Jane ain't the slowest sort when she gets a-goin', though I'll sw'ar she's see'd her best days. I've bet on her many a time, and allus won—but not inside the last eight yearn. I say, little 'un, war' that pesky red-skin trying to carry you off?"

"Yes," she replied, "and he would certainly have succeeded, but for the timely interference of Edward."

"Cuss his rotten hide! I'd like to know what he wanted to do that fur? War'n't he drunk?"

"I am sure he was not."

Adam Griff looked perplexed.

"I never expected sich a thing of Solomon. He allus 'peared to be a right squar' kind of a chap. Strikes me he ought to try and behave hisself, 'cause he hain't got a friend on 'arth 'xcept the pale-faces. He war turned out of the tribe he used to b'long to, and thar's not a Injun as wouldn't take his skulp as quick as they'd steal a beaver-trap. 'Thar's not one of 'em on his side."

"If that is the case," said Westlake, "it is a mystery to me why he should wish to steal Marian away from her home."

"I am able to enlighten you a little on that point," said Marian. "Solomon is avaricious, as you both know; it is

the glitter of gold that has worked upon his bad principles in this affair."

"Gold!" echoed her lover, in surprise.

"Certainly. He has been hired by another party to attempt my capture."

"How know you that?"

"He told me."

"Then," cried Edward, striking the stock of his rifle on the ground, "this affair is not yet settled. Tell me who the villain is that has dared to do this, and I'll confront him before the sun sets!"

"Not so fast, Edward; the person you speak of will not be so easily found as you imagine."

"Who is he?"

"His name is TURK REDBY."

"What?"

At the mention of that name, the two men started back as if they were struck, and both stared half-incredulously at the girl.

Old Adam was the first to speak.

"Do you mean that?" he asked.

"I have just told you what the Indian told me," replied Marion, quietly. "I can tell you no more. When I reproached him for his villainous conduct, he confessed that it was all for gold, and that the person who had bribed him was Turk Redby."

"Can it be that that fiendish desperado is in these parts?" muttered Edward.

"Must be," rejoined the trapper. "Ef he warn't in these parts, I reckon he wouldn't be bribin' Solomon to captur' the gal fur him. Yas, the cuss have come back to this neighborhood, I make no doubt, jist as he promised when he went away, but you may stake yer last shiner he's 'cute enough to keep his mug under kiver. Ef he shows hisself now he'll be lynched, sure as shootin'. I s'pose Solomon didn't give you no clue as to whar the chap mought be found, little 'un?"

"None whatever."

"But we must find him," declared Edward. "After that parting threat with which he favored us, it strikes me that none of us are safe while he is lurking in this vicinity."

"His case ought to be 'tended to, that's sartin," said Adam. "But we'll have to s'arch fur him kinder on the sly, so's he won't know nothin' 'bout what's going on."

"That is true," conceded the young man; "therefore, the fewer persons we take into our confidence, the better it will be for our chances of success. I wonder what will occur next?" he added with a smile. "On my return from the mountains—and before reaching home—I have rescued Marian from the hands of an Indian, have learned that Turk Redby has come back, and have been told that two more men are missing from the fort, to say nothing of my introduction to those Specter Riders. Why, I'm almost prepared to find the fort turned upside down, and the people all standing on their heads."

Marian broke into a merry peal of laughter.

"Edward, has Adam been storing your mind with nonsense about horrible specters on horseback, which he imagines he saw the other day?"

"Didn't 'magine nothin'," spoke up the old scout. "I see'd them spooks t'other day jist as sartin as I'm standin' hyur. Hain't been stuffin' the boy's mind with nonsense, nuther. *He* see'd 'em hisself, with his own two eyes, afore I met him."

The girl turned her gaze upon Edward.

"Yes, Marian," said he, in reply to her look of inquiry, "I *did* see the awful phenomenon which old Adam has told you about."

"When?"

"Last night. I not only saw the strange horsemen, but was pursued by them several miles, on the prairie."

"Can it be possible? Are you sure you saw them plainly enough to admit of no doubt as to what they were?"

"Quite sure. They were close upon me when I saw them, and the moon, bursting through a cloud, rendered the night almost as light as day. There were three fleet-footed horses, and upon the back of every horse sat a human skeleton."

"Adam," said the girl, taking the trapper's hand, "pardon me for what I said a minute ago. It was so wonderful that I couldn't believe you had seen real skeletons on horseback, though I couldn't guess how you had been so deceived

But, I believe it now, although I never heard of any thing half so strange."

"The truth will come to light sooner or later," said Edward, confidently. "I am half-inclined to believe that the missing men have withdrawn from sight of their own accord, merely to create a sensation, and that they are practicing a joke on the people of Fort Binkley with these Specter Riders."

Adam Griff shook his head.

"Your views ain't mine, by a long reach," said he, in his deep, drawling voice. "I'll tell you what my opinyin are: I think thar's no joke consarned with the disappearance of Dean Potter and the other fellers. This coon has somehow got it into his noddle that the poor chaps war spirited away by them same specters, and that more on us will vamose in the same way, ef we don't keep a skinned eye in our heads."

"We'll keep open eyes now, I think. But we have had no dinner, and I am hungry as a wolf. Let us go home. Here, Marian; I want to walk a little, so you may ride Cherokee."

She did not object, and he lifted her to the saddle as easily as if she were an infant. Then he walked beside her, and in this manner they returned to the fort, old Adam Griff and his highly-prized Sarah Jane taking the lead.

CHAPTER V.

THE THREAT OF A MONSTER.

If the reader will pardon a brief digression in this place, we will take the present opportunity of going back and gathering up an event or two, which occurred some time prior to the opening chapters of this record, but which, nevertheless, have an important bearing upon our story.

One year ago that spring, a stranger had arrived at Fort Binkley, and taken up his abode there.

He was a man of extraordinary personal appearance, calcu-

lated to attract attention wherever he went ; but the looks and remarks of others, however significant, never seemed to disturb him in the slightest degree. He was straight as an arrow and strong as a bullock, measuring six feet in height, and three and a half from shoulder to shoulder ! His beard was black as jet, and cropped short ; his hair uncommonly long for a man, and his eyes deep-set and piercing, with a sinister expression constantly lurking in their inky depths. He wore a black hunting-shirt, always open at the throat, high-topped boots drawn on outside of his buck-skin breeches, and a slouched hat shading his coarse, brutal features. It was frequently remarked that he looked more like an outlaw and desperado than the peaceable adventurer he claimed to be ; but, notwithstanding general appearances had a tendency to excite suspicion, that was by no means sufficient reason for refusing him admittance to the fort.

This man gave his name as Turk Redby.

For one month after his arrival no one had cause to complain of his conduct. He formed few acquaintances, attended to nobody's affairs but his own, and he did little else besides hunting and fishing, by which means he supported himself. But at the end of that month the difficulty began.

One morning, at an early hour, Marian Howarth mounted her father's horse and sallied forth for a gallop on the plain. When about two miles from the fort she was met by Turk Redby. She was a little frightened when she saw him approaching, for she had never liked the looks of the man, and she had often thought how she would dislike to meet him alone, in a place where no friends were near to help her. Besides, she now observed something in the expression of his face that gave her cause for additional uneasiness, and here she was far from home, where nobody could hear her cries for aid, if aid were needed. He was mounted, as she was, and, riding up to her, he executed a profound bow, and stopped.

Marian tried to pass, but the man bent over and grasped one of her hands. Trembling in every limb, she looked up at him. His black, piercing eyes were fastened upon her with a steady gaze, whose meaning could not be mistaken.

“Marian Howarth,” said he, in a rough yet earnest voice,

"you are the fairest flower which Nature has planted in this region! You are beautiful! You are worthy of the admiration of a king, or the envy of the proudest queen!"

It was a singular speech for him to make, especially as it was the first time he had ever spoken to her, and as it came without a single preliminary remark. Marian snatched her hand from his, as she would from the touch of a serpent.

"Leave me, sir," she said, angrily. "I don't like to be stopped by force, and I wish to have no words with you. Let me pass."

"Stay but a moment, Miss Howarth," he rejoined, detaining her, as she essayed to ride on. "Hear what I have to say; I will not detain you long. Dear Marian, since I have come to Fort Binkley you have won my heart! I am deeply, desperately in love. I adore you; I worship the very ground you walk upon. I can not live without you—"

"Sir, I command you to leave me!" cried Marian.

"Not until you have answered me," replied Turk Redby, drawing up his tall figure. "Not until you have told me that my passion is in some measure returned."

The girl gave her horse a cut with her whip, and he jumped forward. But, quick as thought, the man seized the bridle-rein, put forth his gigantic strength against that of the horse, and in a moment the animal stood still again.

"Hands off, villain!" exclaimed Marian, flushing with indignation. "Hands off, and let me pass, or you shall repent this insult. I will cause my father to punish you."

"Not so fast, my sweet little bird. When you promise to become my wife, you are at liberty to fly homeward; but if you refuse to make such a promise, by the Eternal you will never look upon the face of your father again! I would rather lose my soul than you, and I would rather be your murderer than see you bestow your affections upon another."

The last word had just dropped from the ruffian's mouth when down came the little riding-whip across the back of the hand that held the bridle, cutting into the flesh, and causing it to relax its hold. In an instant there was a snort and a plunge, and before Redby was aware that he had released her, Marian was riding with the speed of the wind toward the fort.

He did not pursue. She glanced over her shoulder, and saw him still sitting there in his saddle, as motionless as a rock, looking after her as she fled from his presence. Unreasonable as he appeared to be, he evidently saw that it would be worse than useless to follow.

On arriving home, Marian's first impulse was to go to her father and tell him what had happened. But she took a second thought, and, believing that Turk Redby would never show himself at the fort again, after the gross insult he had offered her, she concluded to keep the secret of the affair locked up in her own breast, for two or three days at least.

But she mistook the character of the man. He did not put in an appearance again that day, but the next morning he came in as boldly as if he had never done any thing wrong in his life.

He went straight to the commandant's quarters, and demanded an interview with Colonel Howarth.

No sooner was he face to face with that officer, than—in the abrupt manner in which he always introduced a subject—he asked him for the hand of his daughter. The colonel was astonished, dumbfounded, indignant. He turned red and white several times in succession before he could utter a word, and when he did recover the use of his tongue, it was only to jerk out the one word :

“*You !*”

“*Yes, I,*” replied Redby, in an impudent, defiant way. “I’ve got considerable money, and you had better let me have the girl, before she falls into the clutches of some chap who can’t keep her out of want.”

“But you are not serious, Redby ?” said the astonished father.

“I mean precisely what I say,” was the curt response.

“Then, sir, leave my presence at once !” cried the colonel, white with rage, as he pointed toward the door. “Begone ! and let me never hear another word from you on this subject.”

It was not the mild refusal that might have been expected from one of Colonel Howarth’s disposition, but the idea of *his* daughter—beautiful, refined, delicate, innocent Marian—the idea of *her* being selected for the wife of this coarse, villain-

ous-looking adventurer, was more than he could listen to and keep his temper.

"Go!" he said; "I will not hear another syllable from you. This is absurd—it is preposterous."

A sneer curled Turk Redby's lip, and an ominous fire began to burn in his wicked-looking eyes.

"Curse you!" he hissed, through his grinding teeth. "When I leave at your order I will let you know."

"Do you refuse to obey?"

"Do I? Can't you see that I do? You shall receive my proposition with more respect before I go."

"This is folly, sir. If you do not withdraw within five minutes, by heaven I will have you removed!"

"There are not men enough in the fort to do that," declared the adventurer, in a bullying way. "I tell you, colonel, you are trifling with no common person, now. I am desperate. You had better consider your own safety before laying violent hands on me, and you had better think twice before refusing me the hand of your daughter. I will not take a refusal. The opposition of an army can not prevent me from accomplishing my purpose! The girl shall be my wife in spite of heaven and earth!"

Colonel Howarth stepped to the door to call in help, with the intention of removing the boisterous wretch per force. Before he could do so, however, Redby stepped forward and dealt him a blow between the eyes, with his heavy fist, which sent him staggering back into one corner of the apartment. At that instant a soldier, attracted by the loud, angry voices of the disputants, rushed into the room and attempted to interfere. But he was scarcely inside when the desperado drew a pistol, leveled it at him, and fired. The soldier fell with a groan, and stained the floor with his blood.

Having done this, the outlaw tried to escape, but a command from Colonel Howarth rung like a bugle-blast through the quarters, and his retreat was cut off by a score of sturdy men. There was a struggle, but in less than ten minutes Turk Redby was a prisoner, securely confined in a cell of the block-house.

The soldier who was shot in the colonel's room, was seriously, though not mortally wounded.

He was rendered a cripple for life, by receiving the bullet in his knee.

The garrison was thrown into a state of intense excitement by this bold assault upon the commandant, and the soldiers were eager to resent the insult, as well as to avenge their wounded comrade.

A few of the hottest-headed ones were in favor of hanging the monster, but to this the colonel would not give his consent. He set his face sternly against putting the fellow to death, assuring them that the extent of the offense—although murder had been attempted—would not justify them in taking the offender's life. It was finally decided that Turk Reddy should receive a severe flogging, as condign punishment for his conduct, after which he was to be banished from the fort, with a warning that he could not return, except at the forfeit of his life.

So, one morning, several days after his imprisonment, he was led out to the place of torture. The place selected for the castigation was just beyond the confines of the fort, and it was to take place in the presence of the entire population.

The prisoner was stripped to the waist, and tied to a post, which had been set into the ground for this purpose.

Three men—strong, muscular fellows, all of them—were appointed by Colonel Howarth to inflict the punishment. Armed with whips, each of which possessed a number of lashes, these men performed by turns the task assigned to them; and if they used all their strength to make every stroke as severe as possible, it was the thought of a comrade maimed for life that steeled their hearts. Fast, and without mercy, fell the cutting thongs upon the uncovered back of the wretch, bringing the blood at every blow, but no cry, no groan, not even a murmur fell from the sufferer's lips. Only an occasional quiver of the body showed that he was sensible of the pain.

But when the punishment was completed, and the cords that bound him to the stake were untied, he fell to the ground in a swoon.

Restoratives were promptly given him, and he soon recovered and rose to his feet.

Without a word he turned his back on his torturers, and moved slowly off, refusing assistance in donning his garments. When a few yards away, he stopped and turned toward the crowd. He was pale, and looked weak, but his voice was strong, loud, and steady enough for all to hear, as he said :

“ Though I leave you now, I swear you are not rid of me yet ! Before a year has expired there are those among you who will feel the vengeance of a desperate man ! ”

While speaking, his eyes were fastened with a ferocious look upon the principal actors in the infliction of his punishment.

As he ceased, he turned on his heel, waved his hand, and walked slowly away, without again looking back.

The crowd watched him with solemn faces, until he was out of sight, and since that memorable hour the people of Fort Binkley had neither seen nor heard of Turk Redby.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW WILL IT END ?

THERE was no little excitement created at the fort, when Adam Griff and Edward Westlake returned, with an account of what had occurred. The intelligence that the Indian dwarf, Solomon, had turned traitor, and that Marian had well-nigh become his captive, was surprising enough in itself ; but, when they went on to say that Solomon was in the service of Turk Redby, and that the latter was somewhere in the vicinity, wonder and indignation found vent in excited exclamations and clamorous inquiries.

So Redby had returned already. A few there were who thought it an idle story, fabricated by the Indian, but it was the general belief that the desperado had in reality come back to that neighborhood, and was at that moment in concealment not far away.

Whether he had come for the purpose of wreaking some terrible vengeance upon those who had given him his just

dues, or whether his sole object was to attempt the capture of the girl he professed to love, was, of course, a matter of conjecture. It was now one year since his banishment. How long he had been back there, no one could tell. Probably, instead of going away, he had been lurking near the fort ever since his departure.

The excitement was increased when young Westlake, urged by the trapper, recounted his adventure with the Specter Riders.

Adam Griff's story, which that worthy had told a day or two before, had not worked very strongly upon the credulity of those who heard it, as the majority believed that, in some unaccountable manner, he had been deceived. But, now that his statement was corroborated by Edward, who told a story still more wonderful than that of the trapper, the people could only conclude that there was something in it, after all.

Both of these were men of undoubted veracity. That they aimed to tell nothing but the plain truth could not be questioned, and since their descriptions of the awful spectacle were very similar, it was unanimously conceded that such a mystery really did exist.

Quite a number believed that the missing men—Dean Potter, Simon Dawes and Joe Crampton—were in some manner connected with it; but there was a diversity of opinion as to the nature of the connection. While some thought it was simply a trick played upon them by the three men, others supposed that the Specter Riders were actually spirits from the dead, and that they were the cause of the trio's mysterious disappearance. This was a superstitious belief, but there were several, who had always contended that they had no faith in the supernatural, that now had not a word to say in opposition to such a belief. How would it end?

Colonel Howarth scratched his head and frowned, as he always did when perplexed.

"Peterson," he cried out, to a man standing near, "tell young Westlake and Adam Griff that I wish to see them immediately."

It did not surprise Edward and Adam in the least, for they had both known the colonel long enough to understand

him perfectly. Whenever he was at a loss how to act, he invariably sent for these two scouts, if they were at the fort, always certain of their ability to advise him beneficially.

In ten minutes the three men were closeted together in the commandant's private apartment, in the block-house.

They held a consultation. Colonel Howarth first spoke of the Specter Horsemen, asking an endless number of questions concerning them, and declaring repeatedly that it was the strangest thing he had ever heard of. Skeletons riding horses! Why, it was perfectly awful! And striking the table a tremendous blow with his fist, he told his two friends he never could have believed such a preposterous story, had it proceeded from other lips than their own. What course should he pursue to investigate the cause of this mystery?

Edward thought it unnecessary to attempt an investigation.

"Whatever they are," said he, "we can not say that they have offered to harm any one as yet. True, they pursued me hotly last night, but when I discharged my pistols they turned aside and galloped away, as unconcerned as if it mattered nothing to them in which direction they rode. I believe there is nothing to be apprehended from them, and the mystery will explain itself if let alone. Besides, in my opinion, there are matters of more importance demanding attention at present."

Adam Griff said it was impossible to find out any thing about it, and therefore all time consumed in the attempt would be foolishly wasted.

"Why, durn it!" he exclaimed, hanging his cap on the muzzle of his rifle, and discharging a stream of tobacco-juice clean across the room, "them things is sperrits, and yer can't make any thing else out on 'em, and whar's the use tryin' to do sunkthin' with sperrits? They'll have thar own way, in spite of fate."

"We will let that subject drop for the present," observed the colonel, "since neither of you think it worth while to try and stop the perambulations of those strange riders. But what about this man, Turk Redby? It strikes me that he means mischief by returning to this neighborhood, and if we continue to baffle him in his efforts to steal my daugh-

ter, there is no telling what he will do. I would send out a body of men without delay, to search for his hiding-place, but for one thing: there are now three parties out, hunting for Potter, Dawes and Crampton, and I can not tell how long they will be absent. In existing state of affairs, when the Indians seem on the verge of digging up the hatchet, I hesitate to thin out the garrison more, and thus weaken our resources for defense."

"No occasion fur it, kurnel," said Adam, confidently, throwing one long leg over the other, and firing another charge of juice across the room.

"Well?" returned the colonel, interrogatively.

"Me and the youngster have made that up atwixt us," continued the scout. "We're goin' to go out alone in s'arch of Turk Redby."

"Alone!"

"Sartin we be. Thar's no use sendin' a hull score of men to look fur a single man."

"But, supposing you find him, you will probably need assistance when it comes to making him surrender."

"Bah! 'tain't likely, noways. Ef we do, I reckon one of us kin watch him while t'other comes back arter help. No use talkin', kurnel; we're boun' fur to do this by ourselves, and hyur's what stakes his pile that we won't come back without findin' the feller's lurkin'-place."

Colonel Howarth seemed to reflect.

"I believe you are right," he said. "There are no other two men in the fort whom I could feel safe in sending upon an errand like this, but your success in previous undertakings, and your skill in overcoming dangers and uncertainties, force me to believe that you will succeed in this."

"We propose to do what we can, sir," said Edward, modestly.

"And when do you wish to start?"

"As soon as you see proper to send us; the sooner the better, I think."

"Reckon we'd better go to-morrer," said Adam.

"Make it the day after to-morrow," interposed Colonel Howarth, addressing the trapper. "Remember that Westlake has been on a long and tedious journey, and should have one day for rest."

"Wal, the day arter to-morrer is soon enough, I calc'late," replied Adam, rising and stretching his limbs.

And that was the result of the consultation.

Next morning Marian rose bright and early, and came forth to take her favorite recreation—a gallop in the open air. As was always the case when Edward was not absent, she rode his handsome white steed, Cherokee, and it was a most beautiful picture they made together. Marian always chose to ride alone, in her morning exercise, but on this occasion her father would not hear to her going outside of the walls unaccompanied. In vain she assured him she was not afraid; he told her that she was afraid of nothing, that there was danger as long as Turk Redby lurked in the vicinity, and that she must not incautiously expose herself to that danger. She laughed merrily at his fears, but told him he could do as he liked about providing her with an escort.

"I will go with you myself," said the colonel. "I believe I am in need of exercise of this kind, and consequently I shall kill two birds with one stone."

And so Colonel Howarth mounted his own spirited horse, and accompanied Marian as her protector.

Edward stood at the gate as father and daughter rode out, and somehow his heart fairly leaped as he looked at her. He thought she had never looked so charming as now, with her dark eyes sparkling, her hair blowing unheeded about her face, and the cold wind kissing the roses into her cheeks.

Mounted upon Cherokee—and riding as if born to govern the noble brute—she did, indeed, make a beautiful appearance.

"Good-by, Edward!" she cried, laughingly, as they passed him. "Maybe you will never see me again."

He knew it was a hit at her father, for his fears, but nevertheless he could not help feeling a little uneasy as the words fell upon his ears.

When a little distance away, Marian turned her head and kissed her hand to Edward. He answered, and then silently there by the gate he stood, watching the riders as they galloped away, nor removed his eyes from their receding forms until they were lost to view beyond the distant ledges.

"Maybe you will never see me again."

Somehow these words, playfully though they were uttered, made a singular impression on our hero.

He could not get them off his mind, and he caught himself repeating them again and again under his breath.

A strange, sickening terror took possession of him.

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE TRAIL.

WHEN Colonel Howarth rode out with his daughter, he told a subordinate officer, who desired an interview with him, that he would be back in one hour, positively.

He was not as good as his word. Two—three—four hours passed away, and still the colonel and the girl were absent.

What could detain them so long? Something of a serious nature must have occurred, rendering it utterly impossible for them to return at the specified time, for the colonel was not a man who would break a promise without sufficient cause. Edward thought of Marian's parting words, "Maybe you will not see me again," and of the manner in which they had affected him at the time. Probably she had spoken the truth unconsciously. He turned very pale at the thought of it.

Noon came and went, and still the absent couple did not put in an appearance. The whole fort was thrown into a state of intense excitement and alarm, and every one was eager to learn what had happened to the missing ones. The majority believed that Indians were at the bottom of it, but quite a number whispered mysteriously to one another about the Specter Riders, and the similar disappearance of the three men, Potter, Crampton and Dawes. In their opinion the Specter Riders were the cause of all, and at the head of this party was the old trapper, Adam Griff.

Something must be done! That was the cry of all, but what it was that must be done was another question. Here the commander of the fort, together with his beautiful daughter, had gone away in that same silent, unexplicable manner

which had characterized the disappearance of those three unfortunate soldiers, and in all probability would never be seen or heard of again. Yes, something *must* be done. No one could think of letting the matter rest without making some sort of an effort in behalf of their gallant leader. Nearly all were in favor of sending out a company to rescue him, and that would have been speedily done but for the sturdy interposition of old Adam Griff. The trapper was always listened to eagerly in a consultation, and he now held the attention of all as he laid before them, in his own quaint manner, the course which he deemed it the part of prudence to pursue. He first explained the risk incurred in sending out a company, and thus making the garrison unnecessarily weak at a time when the Indians were showing dissatisfaction; and then he went on to say that he and Edward Westlake would volunteer to take the trail, and would do all in their power to recover the lost ones. This offer was met with general approbation, though several insisted upon accompanying the two scouts, until quieted by a stern command to hold their tongues.

So every thought of searching for Turk Redby was for the present relinquished, and it was decided that Edward and Adam should take the trail of the missing commandant and his daughter.

It was now the middle of the afternoon, and without wasting another minute of time, the two men hastily equipped themselves for a journey. Edward had to borrow a horse, his own having been given into the possession of Marian, but this, of course, was easily done, where everybody was eager to render a service to Colonel Howarth.

In a very short time they were in their saddles. With a final good-by to their friends, from whom they received words of cheer and prayers for success, they galloped away.

"'Thar goes two more," said somebody in the crowd, "and I opine they'll never return to Fort Binkley. Wouldn't be s'prised ef we never see any on 'em ag'in in this world."

The course followed by Edward and Adam lay due west, which was the direction taken by the colonel and Marian in their departure. Edward was mounted upon a spirited little pony, of the mustang breed, while Adam, of course, bestrode the irrepressible Sarah Jane.

At first they were enabled to travel at good speed, but as soon as it became necessary to shape their course by the trail on the ground they were compelled to fall into a walk. In some places the trail was so dim that the trapper would have to dismount to keep it in sight, moving along in a stooping posture and leading his mare. At such times Edward's duty was to ride slowly behind, and keep the country, as far as his eyes could reach, under a constant inspection. In this manner they proceeded, sometimes quite rapidly, but often so slowly that our hero fairly trembled with impatience.

At a distance of about five miles from the fort they made their first halt. It was at this point that the trail met with its first interruption, and they paused to examine the ground.

Here they made a startling discovery. Up to this time it appeared that Marian and her father had ridden at a steady canter, side by side, but on this spot they had evidently drawn rein. There were innumerable hoof-prints in the yielding soil, suggesting one of two things: that the horses had not stood very quietly or had been joined by others.

"Which is it?" asked Edward, who was the first to speak of the conflicting probabilities.

"They've been j'ined by others, I take it," returned the trapper, looking at the tracks with some perplexity. "You jist keep yer seat, while I git down and take a cluser view."

With this Adam slid out of the saddle, and began a closer examination of the ground.

"Do you make out any thing?" asked his companion, eagerly.

"Heap," was the laconic reply.

"Strange tracks, eh?"

"S'ure's shootin'. Thar's lots of tracks hyur that war never made by Cherokee, or the kurnel's hoss."

"Then it was on this spot that the difficulty took place, and from here we must take the trail in earnest."

"Now you're talkin', boy, but we want to understand what tuk place hyur, afore we go further."

Edward dismounted and joined his friend in the examination.

"I almost fear to look about," he said, "for I more than half-expect to discover something that will tell us Marian

and her father have met with a horrible fate. *Good Heaven !*"

"Eh ? What's the matter ?" demanded the trapper, startled by the sudden exclamation of the young man.

Edward was standing there, just where he had dismounted, his face ashy white, and his eyes gleaming like stars.

"What's the matter, boy ?" repeated Adam, slapping him on the back.

Edward pointed to the ground.

"Look !" he gasped. "It is blood—I know it is blood !"

Adam did look, and a cloud swept over his features. It *was* blood—dark, coagulated blood—spilled some hours before, as its appearance plainly indicated, and although it had been partially trampled into the earth by the horses, there were still pools and blotches left to tell of the dark deed that had been perpetrated on this spot.

The two men looked significantly at each other.

"It is human blood—of course ?" said Edward, huskily.

"I ruther think it are," was the muttered rejoinder.

"Then one or both of them has been killed !"

There was no tremor in the young man's voice as he said this ; but he was pale as death, and there was cold perspiration on his forehead.

"Maybe 'tain't so bad as that, youngster," said Adam.

"I hope not, but it looks bad—very bad. Somebody has evidently been killed or seriously hurt, and the most reasonable supposition is that it was either the colonel or Marian, or both. Have you ascertained which direction their enemies came from ?"

"Yas ; hyur's whar the tracks jine. They dashed onto 'em at full speed, that's sart'in, and they come from yender course."

The trapper pointed to a dense cluster of willow trees growing on a tract of low, marshy land, at a distance of about a furlong from where they stood.

"I suppose," said Edward, "that the demons were hidden among those willows, and burst upon their victims so suddenly and unexpectedly that the latter were unable to make a movement toward escape."

"You're speakin' this bufler's mind now."

"How many enemies were there?" inquired the youth.

"Wal, thar was only three hosses, and I calc'late thar war-n't more men than hosses."

"Only three! Of course they were Indians?"

"That's jist what's puzzlin' my upper story. 'Tain't plain to me that they war Injuns—not by a long shot. In fact, I don't b'lieve Injuns had any thing to do with it whatsum-ever."

"You astonish me."

"Wal, youngster, you know as well as I that reds ain't in the habit of keepin' thar hosses shod, and if you'll look at these tracks you'll diskiver that every hoof w'ars a shoe."

"But who could they be, if not Indians?"

Adam Griff seemed to hesitate before replying to this query, and looked keenly at his companion. Then, in a subdued voice, as if fearful that somebody else would hear him, he said:

"Edward, it strikes me I'd better jog yer memory a little *The hosses of the Specter Riders are all shod!*"

CHAPTER VIII.

WHO ARE THE CAPTORS?

"WHAT do you mean?" demanded Edward, in a tone of vexation.

"I tick 'tickler notice," continued the trapper, with a shake of his head, "and I see'd they war shod jist like white men's hosses."

"Pooh! I hope you don't believe—"

"Besides," interrupted Adam, "you know thar's jist three of them specters, and ef that number don't correspond with these tracks, I'll draw in my horns."

Edward stamped his foot with impatience; for, to be candid, he was somewhat alarmed by the words of his friend, though he endeavored to conceal it.

"Let us not talk about that now, Adam," said he. "I can

not think as you do ; but whoever or whatever has captured or killed our friends, we must follow and punish them, all the same."

" We'll do that, ef possible," said the trapper, firmly, but with an air that showed he doubted the possibility of punishing any thing that was not mortal. " Hyur's what ain't fur givin' up the job, but it's cl'ar to me them spooks is at the bottom of the hull thing."

Then both renewed their examination of the signs on the ground. These were quite complicated, and for some time no definite conclusion could be arrived at as to the result of the struggle which had taken place here.

" Look at these tracks," cried the young hunter, after wandering away from his companion.

" Don't see 'em 'way off thar, do yer?" inquired the elder, looking up.

" Yes, and they are just as fresh as those. By my soul ! here is Cherokee's footprint. I would know it among a thousand."

The trapper joined him, and scrutinized the earth curiously.

Yes, here were tracks, made by two horses dashing away at break-neck speed, in a southerly direction.

" You're right, youngster," said the old scout ; " this is Cherokee's track."

Edward uttered a joyful exclamation.

" And this other," said he, " is that of the colonel's horse ! Good ! I verily believe they effected their escape, after all."

For some moments Adam was silent ; then, slowly shaking his head, he resumed his upright position, and muttered :

" That's a wrong notion you've got, now, kumrid. The kurnel's hoss hain't passed this way at all, and ef you'll jist take another squint at the 'arth hyur, I guess you'll see yer mistake. My view of the thing is this : when they war set upon by thar enemies, the gal broke away, and tried to escape by flight, while the suddintness of the transaction perverted the kurnel from doin' any thing of the sort. Wal, one of the skunks rushed after the gal, and this are the d'rection they tuck. D'yer see ?"

Edward saw, and his countenance clouded. It was evident that Adam's solution was the proper one.

"Whether Marian was ketched or not," he continued, as he coolly took a chew of tobacco, "remains to be seen. We'll jist foller this trail, and see how it ends."

They had followed it but a dozen rods, when they came to a spot where it was quite obvious Marian had been captured by her pursuers. She had failed to escape.

"What ailed that horse?" cried Edward, fiercely. "He might have done better than that. There isn't a swifter horse in the country."

The trapper shook his head gravely.

"Ef he war swift as lightnin' itself," said he, "thar be no use in tryin' to outrun a *sperrit*; and that's what them Specter Riders are."

"Bah!" was the impatient rejoinder; "didn't he outrun them the other night, when they were after me? If he had not fallen, I could have left them far behind in a jiffy. Pshaw! even if these *are* Specter Riders, I have no faith in their ability to travel faster than mortals."

Neither cared to enter into an argument on this subject, so it was dropped then and there.

Turning aside from the spot where Marian was captured, the two horses had walked away, side by side, returning, by a circuitous course, to the point where the attack had been made.

Following the trail thither, the hunters were forced to the conviction that, if nothing worse had befallen them, Colonel Howarth and daughter were at least in the custody of enemies.

They soon discovered the trail, where the five horses had moved off together, and mounting their own animals, our fearless champions rode along beside it at a brisk canter.

Adam Griff's thirty years' experience on the border now served him a good turn. By mere reference to the indentations in the ground, he was enabled to assert that every one of the five horses in front was mounted. It was by no means an unpleasant discovery, for it went to show that Marian and her father were still alive and in the saddle, and as

this reflection filled them with hope, they pushed resolutely on.

Just at nightfall they reached a broad but shallow stream of water, running directly across their path. They did not cross it.

By this time it was too dark to follow the trail further, and they decided to stop on the bank of the stream until morning. So, after tethering their animals, dispatching a frugal meal, and holding a consultation of some length, they spread their blankets upon the ground, and lay down to rest.

CHAPTER IX.

A MEMORABLE NIGHT.

THE night was clear and cold. It was late when the moon made its appearance, but it made ample amends for its tardiness by the flood of tempered refulgence it emitted from its full, round disk, as it slowly ascended the sky.

Nature was at rest, and the silence was impressive. The only sounds to be heard were the monotonous murmur of the river, the deep, measured breathing of the two sleepers, the horses crumpling the grass, and the occasional stamp of an iron-clad hoof. Once or twice, indeed, a wailing cry, faint and far away, came quivering across the prairie, but, though strangely like the cry of a human being, the trailers, had they been awake, would have pronounced it nothing more nor less than a panther's scream.

It was after midnight, when the two men were awakened by a shrill neigh from one of the horses. The sound brought them out of their slumbers with a start. Simultaneously they rose to a sitting posture, rubbing their eyes open, and staring about them, bewildered and alarmed.

"What was it?" asked Edward.

"That war Sarah Jane's voice, unless I'm powerful mistook," growled Adam, endeavoring to clear his eye-sight, "and when she hollers you may sw'ar thar's sunkthin' in

the wind. Jist look at 'em—thar is sunkthin' the matter."

And the position of the animals told that there really was.

They were standing with heads erect, their ears pointed forward, and their glassy eyes looking steadily in one direction.

"They see something," whispered Westlake; "an Indian, probably."

"'Sh!"

At that instant they distinctly heard the neigh of another horse, proceeding from a point further down the river.

As if moved by one impulse, both reached for their rifles, and in a second they had them in their hands, ready for use. Springing to their feet, they scattered the fire in every direction, and then stood waiting for the expected attack. Nothing was to be seen—nothing more to be heard.

The moon shone on with undimmed brilliancy, the river gurgled and sung in its shallow bed, and no other sounds disturbed the stillness.

But old Sarah Jane and the mustang continued to stand with their heads in the air, gazing in the direction from which that answering neigh had come.

"What does it all mean?" exclaimed Edward, looking uneasily around.

"It means thar's somebody in this neighborhood besides ourselves," was the confident rejoinder.

"There certainly was a moment since, but we have no proof that such is the case now."

"See how them critters stare—that's proof."

"Hush! Look—look!"

Both saw it at the same time, though what it was neither could tell, since their keen eyes could give it no shape. It was an object of some description, several paces distant, and so dimly visible, that it would not have attracted attention, had it not been in motion.

It was something alive and moving—something white.

"Can you tell what it is?" whispered the young man.

"Not any," replied Adam. "You stay hyur, boy, and I'll go and see what the cussed thing are."

The trapper pulled his cap down to his eyebrows, bent his body almost double, and before his companion could utter a word of remonstrance against a proceeding so dangerous, he was gliding swiftly toward the unknown object.

Edward's first impulse was to follow, but a second thought told him it were better that he should remain quietly where he was, until assured that the scout needed his assistance.

Scarcely was Adam out of sight when the clear report of his rifle rung out with startling effect on the still night air.

Edward caught his breath at the sound, and took a step or two forward, with his own gun at his shoulder. He paused—there was a furious snorting and plunging, immediately followed by the clatter of hoofs, as a number of horses galloped away with the speed of the wind.

Then came the sound of approaching footsteps, and the next instant Adam Griff came running up, as fast as his long legs could carry him, with his gun in his hand. His face was whiter than usual, his lips were compressed, his eyes gleamed like stars, and, as he stopped, panting in front of Edward, the latter thought he had never seen him looking so wild and flurried.

"Good gracious! man, what has happened?"

"Nothin' to speak of," was the husky reply.

"But you have seen something," persisted Edward, looking steadily at him. "What did you shoot at?"

"Wal, ef you're determined to know, I'll tell you. See 'yur, boy, would yer b'lieve it?—it was *them* we see'd."

"I don't understand."

"I war elus to 'em. I see'd 'em as plain as I see you now."

"Who are you talking about?"

"The Specter Riders!"

"Heavens! did you see them?"

"Did I? Lord bless you, I war right onto 'em 'fore I knowed it," said the trapper, beginning to talk more freely.

"And the moving object we saw was one of the Specter Riders?"

"That's jist exactly what it war, and I calc'late they war hangin' 'round hyur fur no good. They wanted to sperrit us off in our sleep, that's what I'm thinkin'."

"You shot at them?"

"Yas, but I hardly knowed what I was doin'."

"Without effect, of course?"

"Good Lord! I might as well have shot at a whirlwind. But I reckon it did some good, though, 'cause it skeered the blasted things away. Wagh! they're easy skeered, ef bullets can't hurt 'em."

As a matter of course there was no more sleep for the trailers that night, for both were so thoroughly awakened and excited by what had occurred that they felt as though they would never again feel the need of sleep. Adam Griff, especially, was in favor of keeping his eyes open until dawn, since he firmly believed the Specter Riders would be upon them in a minute if they should allow themselves to fall into unconsciousness again. Though bold as a lion, and afraid of no mortal enemy, Adam nevertheless possessed a weakness which was easily worked upon by any thing wearing a supernatural air, and really felt that his only danger was from that which could not be understood. In this respect he was like nearly all of his class, but entirely different from many persons we wot of, with a vein of superstition in their natures, who would feel no cause for alarm if surrounded by spirits, as no physical harm could be received from them, but proved themselves arrant cowards when their courage was tested by flesh and blood adversaries.

About an hour after the event which had aroused them from their slumbers, the hunters were sitting on the bank of the stream, with their blankets wrapped closely around them, to ward off the chilly night air, while they kept up an unremitting watch for danger.

They were discussing the duties of the morrow, and comparing opinions as to the probable distance that must be traveled before the terminus of the trail could be reached. All at once, while Edward was speaking, the trapper grasped his arm roughly, checking his utterance in the middle of a sentence.

Edward turned toward him in surprise.

"What do you hear now?" he asked, observing that Adam was bending forward in a listening attitude.

"Listen, and you'll hear it yerself," was the reply.

The young man dropped his ear close to the ground, in imitation of the scout's position, and listened intently.

Far away in the north-west he heard a low, deep rumbling, like that caused by a volcanic eruption, scarcely audible as yet, but growing more and more distinct every moment, as if a fearful tornado were rushing upon them.

He raised his head and looked at Adam.

"What is it?" he asked, in astonishment.

"Can't yer guess?" returned Adam.

Edward reflected a moment.

"It can hardly be thunder," he said, musingly.

"Bah! do yer see any clouds in that direction?"

"Not the trace of a cloud, therefore it is not thunder. One might think it was caused by myriads of chariots running races on a remote part of the globe— Ah! now I know what it is. Why did I not think of that before? It is a herd of buffalo."

"Now you've got it," said Adam, with his low laugh. "Now you've got it sure as shootin'. It is a herd of buffalo."

"And an immense herd, too," said Edward, emphatically, as he continued to listen.

"You're talkin' facks now, youngster."

"And it is coming this way."

"Jist as fast as it kin travel."

"Good Heaven!" exclaimed Edward, rising to his feet; "are we not in a dangerous position?"

Adam also rose, and stood beside his companion.

"Wal, ef this crick war'n't hyur," he replied, "we'd find it needcessary to turn tail and git, fur the sake of our lives. The bufflers are comin' from the north-west, and 'tain't likely they'll cross the crick 'fore they git hyur, so I reckon we're safe in holdin' our ground, ef thar ain't none on this side."

"Suppose they should make an abrupt turn, when they are exactly opposite, and cross?"

"No danger of that. Ef they kin help it, bufflers won't cross a river while they're on the run."

All this time the deep rumbling had grown louder and louder, until it culminated in an awful, tremendous roar, that could be likened to nothing but perpetual thunder. Steadily, swiftly, the vast herd came rushing on, taking in a

stretch of prairie more than a mile wide from flank to flank, and it seemed the terrible noise would never cease to increase.

Edward's pony became frightened, and he was compelled to hold him, while Adam followed the example by grasping the lariat by which his mare was tethered, although the ancient creature continued to crop the grass as unconcerned as if nothing was capable of disturbing her equanimity.

It was now evident that the buffaloes were all on the opposite side of the stream, and the situation of the hunters was, by this means, deprived of all danger. No one, who has never seen these immense droves of buffaloes in motion, can have but a slight conception of the awful grandeur of the scene, and when it occurs on a moonlight night, with the entire mass moving at a full gallop, it is doubly interesting, provided it can be viewed from a safe standpoint.

Now they came in view—rushing up like the sweep of a vast tidal-wave—countless thousands pressed together in one compact body—surging on like the storm-troubled billows of the ocean. Our friends watched the scene in silence. The opposite side of the stream, from the margin to the furthest point attainable by the eye, was a dark sea of bodies rolling swiftly by. They looked north, south and west. Nothing but a black, bellowing, roaring, thundering mass met their gaze, flowing on with irregular undulations. Once or twice some unfortunate was pushed into the river, and then his frantic floundering was mingled with hoarse bellowing, till he scrambled out and was once more hurled onward by the living tide.

At length the entire herd had passed. Its hindmost members dashed out of sight, and some minutes later the thunder of their hoofs on the hard turf died away in the distance.

CHAPTER X.

THE LOST TRAIL.

FOR some moments after the buffaloes had passed from view, and even after the din they created was no longer to be heard, old Adam Griff maintained a solemn silence, standing as motionless, and apparently as speechless, as a statue, his chin resting on his hands, which were clasped over the muzzle of his gun, and a frown as dark as a thunder-cloud corrugating his brow.

"What ails you?" asked Edward, as soon as the frowning silence of his companion struck him as an indication of new vexations.

Adam shifted his position, looked at the young man, and then shook his head with an astonishing degree of solemnity.

"It's a bad go, youngster," said he.

"What is a bad go?"

"Why, that buffler rampage, in course."

"I don't understand."

"Yer mought by a little cogitatin'."

"What have the buffaloes done to discourage you?"

"Durn it, boy, have you forgot what we're hyur fur?"

"Of course not," laughed Edward. "We are in pursuit of our friends' captors."

"Wal, don't the trail cross this crick?"

Edward gave a quick start.

"Now I know what you mean," he said. "The trail has been obliterated by the buffalo-herd."

"Thar's whar the bug lays," returned the trapper. "Them cussed bufflers have cut the 'arth all to pieces on t'other side of the crick, and we mought as well try to bail the ocean out with a holler tooth, as to look fur the trail over thar. We're stuck, that's jist as plain as the dirt on an Injun's phiz."

"But we can pass over the tract of land trampled by the

buffaloes, and take up the trail beyond that. We may be able to find it again."

"Yas; we mought be able to find a needle in a hay-stack, but it's powerful onsartin. After travelin' over 'bout two miles of kentry, 'tain't no ways likely we kin pick up the trail ag'in. 'Thar's no tellin' which course the skunks tuck arter leavin' the river."

"But you do not contemplate turning back?"

"Wagh! yer knows me better'n that, youngster."

"In heaven's name, then, what are your intentions?"

"Don't git excited, Edward. 'Thar's plenty of time 'twixt this and mornin' to hold a confab on the subject. 'Taint plain to me yit what we're goin' to do, but 'tain't goin' to take this wolf long to make up his mind—you kin fotch u'p yer bottom nugget on *that*. Hyur's what's been in predickiments 'fore to-night, and nobody knows better'n you—"

"That Adam Grid's cunning is surpassed by none on the plains," said Edward, finishing the sentence in consonance with his own mind. "I am anxious to hear what you have to say."

The two men now entered into an earnest conversation, which lasted for several minutes, and the result of the brief deliberation was a decision suggested in the beginning by Adam.

On the approach of dawn they were to cross the stream, and then, instead of continuing their westward course, they were to turn to the south-west. Following this direction, both knew that, after a ride of some fifteen miles, they would find themselves in the most broken country to be found anywhere on the plains, where huge rocks, towering cliffs, intricate passes, gorges, cañons and caverns abounded. Adam's reason for proposing this direction was a belief that Turk Redby's hiding-place was somewhere among the "breaks," and that the captors of Colonel Howarth and Marian—whoever they might be—were employed by Redby.

"Have you given up the opinion that the Specter Riders are the captors?" inquired Edward.

"Not by a long shot," was the reply.

"Then you think those mysterious rovers are in Redby's employ?"

"I does." said Adam, looking at him with an air of surprise.

"Still you think they are spirits, and he a mortal?"

"Never any thing more sartin. Lord bless you, boy, I b'lieve the dis'pearance of them three men war caused by these same skeletons, and that they war directed to do it by that outlaw."

"You think their disappearance, also, is to be attributed to him?"

The trapper turned square upon the young man, and said:

"See 'yar, lad, I reckon as how you recollects when the kurnel had Turk Redby punished at the whippin'-post?"

"To be sure."

"Wal, do yer mind who done the whippin'?"

Edward looked down at the ground to think. In a moment he raised his eyes quickly, and gave vent to a prolonged whistle of surprise.

"I remember now," he said, excitedly. "The three men appointed to whip the villain were those who are now missing—Dean Potter, Simon Dawes and Joe Crampton!"

"That's it," said Adam, coolly. "Now ef you'll think ag'in, maybe you'll recollect how he looked at them fellers, when he swore we should all hear from him ag'in'?"

"I do—this, I firmly believe, is a solution to the mystery enshrouding their disappearance. I did not think of it before."

"I guess nobody thought of it, 'cept me," observed Adam, "else they'd been sartin that Turk Redby war the man to blame."

"Still, you will not believe that Turk Redby did the work himself?"

"Wagh! he couldn't make 'em vanish that way—nobody but sperrits could do that. He controls the sperrits. Now hyur's the kurnel and the gal—they've gone the same route—skeletons done it, in course, but they done it at that skunk's command. He wants Marian, you know, for a wife, and I reckon he'll slit the kurnel's weasand, 'cause he war the one as ordered the floggin' to be did. Look—it's gittin' kinder light over thar in the east."

The eastern sky gave evidence that day was breaking, and, hastily kindling a fire, the hunters prepared their simple

morning meal, allowing themselves but little time to dispatch it.

Before the sun had risen they mounted their animals and crossed the river, which, at this point, was shallow enough to render crossing a matter of no inconvenience whatever. It was a beautiful morning; the air was clear, the sky cloudless, and the temperature cool but invigorating. A stillness like that of the tomb brooded over all, and nothing could be heard save that indescribable voice of the solitude, frequently termed the breathing of nature, which makes the very silence seem audible.

On reaching the west bank of the stream, the men paused to look about them. The ground was scarred by thousands upon thousands of buffalo-tracks, which demolished what little grass there had been, and left dust instead. North and south the prairie extended beyond the reach of human eyes, and to the west it grew billowy, the waves rising one above another till they grew imperceptible in the distance.

Our trailers were about to ride on, when all at once Adam gave utterance to a startled ejaculation, and again tightened the rein.

"Look!" exclaimed he. "Look, youngster!"

He lifted his hand, and pointed down the river.

Edward looked in that direction, and saw the cause of the old scout's alarm. About a half-mile below the point where they had crossed, a peninsular sand-bar extended from the shore almost to the center of the stream. On this bar were three horsemen, all side by side and sitting erect in their saddles, having ridden out there evidently for the purpose of letting their horses drink, since the latter all had their noses to the water. It required only one look to identify them. They were the Specter Riders. Even at the distance of a half-mile this fact was distinguishable, the purity of the atmosphere assisting the eyesight. They were not so far away but that the naked, shining bones could be seen, to say nothing of the white sheet that was wrapped carelessly around every one of the fleshless figures.

When the animals had quenched their thirst, they turned about and walked back to the mainland.

Here, as if their masters exercised no control over them,

they began to move slowly hither and thither, as if searching for grass. The Specters sat like stoics on their backs, apparently paying no attention to each other, nor to any thing, allowing the brutes to take their own course.

Presently one of the horses threw up his head, flung his necks into the air, gave vent to a loud neigh and dashed away at the top of his speed. The others followed his example, and all went scouring over the prairie together.

In a few minutes they sunk out of sight beyond a distant ridge.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WAR-PATH.

ADAM GRIFF stroked his gray beard, and scowled.

"Things is gittin' too confounded mystifications to suit this b'ar," said he, still looking toward the spot where the Specter Riders were seen a few moments ago.

"It is very strange," assented Westlake.

"Them spooks is follerin' us," declared Adam.

"Indeed! I thought we were following them," returned Edward. "You can hardly believe now that those singular fellows are the captors of Marian and her father?"

"Sartin I believe it. Dang it, boy, they ain't human bein's, as has to poke around over the kentry like we do. They kin travel jist as fast or as slow as they please. In course they've tuck the prisoners to Turk Redby's den, and left 'em thar."

Edward smiled. In his mind the Specter Riders were in no manner concerned in the capture of Marian and her father, nor in the disappearance of the men who had gone before.

"Wal, let's be off, kumrid," said the trapper, as he glanced back over his shoulder. "The sun's comin' up, and we hain't made no time yit. Come, Sarah Jane!"

They turned their faces toward the south west, and struck into an easy gallop across the hoof trodden plain. Mile after mile they kept their animals at a steady, monotonous

gait, except when they were compelled to pass through a prairie-dog "town," where the ground was perforated with innumerable holes, made by these little inhabitants of the plains. Through such treacherous places they were prompted by prudence to move slowly.

Nothing more was said on the subject of the Specter Riders, though their thoughts were about equally divided between them and the captives. Edward grew restless and impatient when he thought of Marian in Turk Redby's power, and his constant fear was that they would be too late to save her.

"If she is alive," he said to himself, "I will rescue her from so loathsome a captivity, or lay down my own life in the effort. If she is dead or dishonored, my revenge will be terrible indeed."

His eyes flashed, and his fingers closed involuntarily upon his rifle, as he thought of what the villain's depravity might drive him to do.

After awhile, as they were riding along in silence, Adam Griff suddenly stopped his mare. Unable to see the slightest cause for such an act, Edward also drew rein, and looked inquiringly at the trapper. Adam, however, had his face turned the other way, looking at something in that direction.

Off to the right of their path, at a distance of about fifty yards, was a buffalo-wallow—a huge basin in the earth, measuring, perhaps, twelve feet in diameter, and in shape almost round. Such places as this, made by buffaloes, and used by them chiefly in the spring of the year, are frequently seen on the vast plains east of the Rocky Mountains. Generally they are of sufficient depth to be made use of by white hunters when pursued by Indians, and indeed many a successful resistance has been made against a large band of savages, by parties taking refuge behind an earthwork of this description.

It was this buffalo-wallow that had attracted the trapper's attention. Wondering how an object of so little importance could have caused him to halt, Edward asked :

"What now, Adam?"

Adam turned to his interrogator. There was an expression on his rugged visage, which Edward had seen a score of times

before, and the import of which he instantly recognized. It told as plainly as words that there was danger at hand. Our hero dropped the reins and seized his rifle.

"What is it, Adam?" he asked again.

"'Sh!" cautioned the scout, raising his hand. "Thar's suukthin' in that waller over thar."

"Do you know what it is?" inquired the young man, looking in vain for the "suukthin'" mentioned.

"No," was the reply, "I don't. I only ketched a glimpse of some dark thing, but I s'picion thar's reds hid thar. Jist look at that mud down thar in front of you; don't you see them moccasin-tracks?"

"I do—and they are fresh."

"Jist so. Thar's Injuns somewhar nigh, and ef I ain't powerful mistook— Hello! look yender!"

At that moment a dark, colossal form rose into view from behind the rim of the wallow, and walked deliberately out on the level land, where it stopped and looked at the hunters.

Edward threw his head back, and burst into a hearty laugh.

"An old buffalo bull!" exclaimed he, "and you, one of the oldest hunters on the border, thought it was a party of redskins."

The trapper was vexed.

"Hold yer clapper, boy," he commanded peremptorily, "and wait till yer knows which one of us is right. I thought you'd seen too many Injun tricks to be tuck in by this 'un."

These words had the effect of checking Edward's mirth. He became grave in an instant, as he took a second look at the creature.

Just then the buffalo, apparently alarmed by the sight of the men, turned about and made as if he would reënter the wallow.

"No yer don't, old bull!" muttered Adam, raising his gun. "Yer don't git this corn to foller ye. Thar—take that!"

The report of his rifle accompanied these last words.

There was a shriek, loud and unearthly. The buffalo staggered forward, and pitched headlong to the ground, turning wrong-side out as he fell! Quick as thought a half-naked In-

dian jumped up and darted into the wallow, where he vanished like a streak of lightning; while another remained lying outside, weltering in his blood.

The artifice employed by the Indians on this occasion was an old one. Probably desiring to capture the whites, instead of kill them, two savages had disguised themselves in a buffalo-hide, the trophy of a recent chase, and had made an effort, as it seemed, to draw the hunters nearer. The trapper's unmerring aim had sent one of the maskers to render up his final account, while the other had fled to shelter before a second shot could be fired.

Crack! crack! crack! went several rifles at this juncture, and the bullets whistled by our friends, uncomfortably close to their persons. At the same moment a deafening war-whoop rent the air, and four athletic savages leaped from their covert and rushed toward their intended victims, brandishing their weapons over their heads and yelling like madmen.

Edward's pony was shot. He saw his head drop, and felt him falling. With astonishing quickness he disengaged his feet from the stirrups and jumped, just as the poor little mustang fell, quivering in the agonies of death. Then his rifle leaped to his shoulder and covered an enemy. The trigger fell, and the foremost savage dropped in his tracks.

With vengeful shrieks the remaining three rushed upon the man who had slain their leader, and for a moment it seemed that Edward's doom was sealed. But, with a celerity that was peculiarly his own, the trapper was down from Sarah Jane's back in a twinkling, and his gaunt person interposed between his friend and enemies. His gun was empty, but he grasped it by the barrel with both hands, dealt one tremendous blow with the heavy stock, and an Indian's brains were scattered to the four winds. The gun fell from his hands, and, snatching his knife from his belt, he sprung upon another of the assailants. There was a gleam of steel, a piercing cry, a faint struggle and another spirit was freed from its earthly tenement.

Only one Indian remained alive. The last they saw of him he was about a mile away, running with wonderful velocity, with no prospect as yet of an abatement in his speed.

"Wal, youngster," said Adam, coolly wiping the blood from his knife, "I reckon we're boss of the situation, ain't we?"

"I believe we are," replied Edward, with glowing face. "Adam, I've seen you fight Indians before to-day, but I never saw you kill two, with a change of weapons, in so short a space of time."

The yellow snag became conspicuous, and a low, crackling sound told that Adam was laughing.

"Did rub 'em out kinder spry-like," he said, with a careless glance at his bloody victims. "They'll know better'n to run ag'in' us another time, won't they, Edward? We knocked the breath out of four on 'em in less'n two minutes. Devil take the skunks, they've got thar fingers in the wrong man's ha'r, when they try to come the bufler trick over Adam Griff. Wal," he added, after a pause, "we mought as well be movin' on. Don't keer 'bout stayin' hyur longer than needcessary."

"There is no likelihood of me moving on," said Edward, "unless I go afoot. Those wretches have killed my horse."

"Is he dead?"

"Dead as a door-nail."

Adam bent over the lifeless pony.

"Got his checks, sure's shootin'," he said. "Shot right through the upper story."

"I suppose that ball was meant for me," observed Edward.

"Not ef I knows any thing about it," declared the other. "It's too well aimed fur that. I guess the cusses wanted to captur' us."

He leaned on his rifle, and looked at the dead mustang with a thoughtful air.

"It's a bad go, youngster," said he, with a shake of his head. "How we're to git another hoss, is beyond my guess. I opine it can't be did. I reckon the only thing we kin do is to ride Sarah Jane by turns. Hello! look at that! Thar's a hoss!"

A little distance from where they stood, strange to say, a horse made its appearance, careering over the prairie. It was a beautiful creature, white as the driven snow, with long tail and mane, and proudly arching neck.

"My God!" cried Edward, turning pale; "it is Cherokee!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE WRITING IN BLOOD.

AND he was right. Beyond a doubt it was no other than the handsome steed, Cherokee, riderless though he was, and unincumbered by saddle or bridle.

"It's him, or I'm a buzzard!" ejaculated the trapper, fastening his keen orbs upon him. "He's turned into a wild hoss ag'in. By the Lord! it makes things look mighty s'picious to see him canterin' around all by hisself."

"He left the fort with Marian on his back," said Edward, trembling with excitement, "and now he is alone. His appearance at this moment suggests a horrible thought."

"Call him, youngster."

Edward put his fingers to his mouth, and gave vent to a peculiar whistle. Instantly Cherokee came to a halt, and looked at the two men with ears erect.

His master repeated the whistle. It was sufficient; the recognition was complete now, and with a joyful neigh the white steed shook his flowing mane, and came trotting toward his young master with a look of extraordinary intelligence.

Our hero went forward to meet him. With a low whinny, that expressed his joy as well as words, Cherokee came up and laid his head on the young man's shoulder, while the latter patted his snowy neck and smoothed the long mane.

All at once, Edward sprung back as if the horse's touch had poisoned him, and gave utterance to a loud exclamation. His cheek blanched, his lower jaw dropped, and he dashed his hand across his eyes, as if inclined to believe they had deceived him. He looked at Adam Griff and pointed at the horse, as though he were dumb and had to communicate by signs. A few strides of those long, dangling legs, and Adam was beside his companion.

"What's the matter, boy?" he asked, in surprise.

Edward again pointed at the horse.

"Look," said he, "and you will see what is the matter."

Adam looked, and he saw. He also started back, and cried, "Good Lord!" while his eyes flew open to their widest extent.

No wonder, for on the smooth, white side of the horse, *written with blood*, and in large, distinct characters, was the single word, "HELP!" That was all; not another mark could be found anywhere on the animal's velvet coat; but that one word, traced, as it evidently had been, with blood, was terribly significant in itself. It could be explained only in one way. It was a message from Marian or her father, who had resorted to this means, in the absence of all others, to inform their friends that they were in a dangerous position, and desired assistance.

Edward shuddered as he looked at it.

"Their need of help must be great," said he, "if they used their own blood—as they undoubtedly did—in writing this brief petition. Poor Marian! poor Marian!"

"Cheer up, boy," said Adam, who felt that the duty of a consoler was incumbent on him. "This ain't no time to give up. You ought to be kinder glad that this thing has happened."

"And why, pray?"

"In the first place, it shows they're lucky enough to be still alive; in the second place, it provides you with a hoss at the very time you need it most—"

"And in the third place," interrupted Edward, with a smile, "the fact that Cherokee comes from the south-west proves that you were right in choosing this direction."

"Jist so."

The saddle and bridle were taken from the dead pony, and put upon Cherokee.

"We'll jist leave these carkidges whar they be," said Adam, "and ef the wolves and vultures kin find any pleasure in sich rotten food, they're welcome. We hain't got time to put the skunks under ground, and I'm doubtin' ef they'd benefit by it ef we had."

They mounted, and turned their backs on the sickening scene, Edward, for one, being glad to leave it. Continuing in the same course they had pursued since leaving their camping-place of the preceding night, they urged their animals

into a swift and steady canter, toward the rugged, rocky ledges that loomed up in the south-western sky. With Cherokee between his knees, Edward felt more at home, and more hopeful, than he had felt since leaving Fort Binkley, but whenever he thought of the fair burden the faithful steed had carried away from the fort, he felt his blood growing cold, with an almost helpless dread.

To him there was something terrible in that laconic message—that one word, “HELP” written with blood on the horse’s side—and there was no relief for the painful suspense he endured, as long as it should remain unexplainable.

As they neared the breaks, they found their way growing exceedingly difficult to travel, and in consequence, they were compelled to move slowly, and with great care. Both animals were sure-footed, and showed that they were accustomed to journeying through mountainous regions; so there was little fear, though some danger at times, of falling from high places.

They struck a buffalo-trail, which they followed implicitly, conscious from experience, that by this method they would be enabled to pass difficult places in safety, and with a certainty of soon being led into a smoother road. They were almost encompassed by high, perpendicular cliffs of black trap-rock, and far above them shapeless, jagged masses were piled up to a dizzy height, almost reaching the clouds. At first, as they proceeded, they were kept constantly on the ascent, but at length, still allowing themselves to be guided by the buffalo-trail, they began to go down.

Dark crevices, deep descents, and narrow, sinuous paths, winding around rocks at an appalling distance from the ground below, were passed over in safety, though with great pains and skill; and several times the riders found it necessary to dismount and lead their animals. The latter’s feet, however, could be trusted where their own could not, and they kept their saddles most of the time.

Presently they emerged into a deep cañon, presenting a smooth, unbroken floor, as far as they could see. It was but little past the middle of the day, and yet it was gloomier than twilight in the cañon.

The latter was narrow, and on either hand the vast walls towered toward the sky, coming so nearly together at the top, that little light was admitted to the depths below.

"Wal, hyur, we be," muttered the trapper, reining in his mare, and turning her half around.

"Surely you do not intend to halt here?" said Edward, with a smile. "We are no better off as yet than when we started."

"We ain't goin' to halt, but I reckon we mought as well do that as move on. Our friends and thar captors may be miles from this p'int, and it looks mightily like a wild goose-chase to hunt 'em among these hills and cliffs."

"Didn't you think of that before we entered the breaks?"

"Sartin, but thar was no help fur it."

"We might have found the trail and followed it, and thus entered at the point they did."

"Precious little trail we'd 'a' found among them rocks, I take it. The Specter Riders know what they're doin'."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Edward, impatiently, "I wish you would give up the idea that the Specter Riders are the captors."

"Wal, then, s'pose it's Turk Redby; *he* ain't green."

"You think he has anticipated pursuit?"

"In course."

"And took the precaution to hide the trail as he neared his den?"

"He ain't sharp ef he didn't. It 'ud be the easiest thing in the world kiverin' a trail in this rocky region."

"What else do you think?"

"I think they come in by the same route we did. I think we're follerin' in thar tracks."

"Indeed?"

"Yas, but thar's no sartainty about it."

"Aha! what's this?" suddenly cried Edward, jumping down from his horse's back, and darting forward a few steps.

He paused, stooped, and picked up something that was lying on the ground.

"What's to pay, now?" asked the trapper, in surprise.

Edward approached, holding something up to view, with an air of triumph. It was a locket—a small, golden locket, with a hook attached, which was evidently the remnant of a chain.

“Did you find that, boy?” asked Adam, getting down from his mare’s back, to look at the trinket.

“To be sure I did,” replied the other, joyously.

“And did you ever see it afore?”

“A hundred times! It is the property of Marian Howarth.”

“Sure’s shootin’?”

“There can be no mistake. She has often showed it to me, and told me how highly she valued it, above everything else. This locket contains the picture of her mother, who is dead.”

He opened it, and showed the picture to Adam.

“Wal,” said the scout, “that proves we’re on the right track, and I reckon it won’t be long ’fore we find Redby’s den. They’ve passed this way, that’s settled, and now we’ve got to push right on, keep our peepers peeled, and be as cautious as we kin. Ef we should blunder onto ’em, a couple of shots would settle our hash in the flap of a buzzard’s wing, and one man mought give us them ef he kotedched us nappin’. We must go slow. Maybe Redby hain’t got nobody to back him, and maybe he has. Ef so, I hope they’re mortals. Foller me, and be quiet.”

They mounted once more, and rode silently on through the deep, gloomy gorge.

CHAPTER XIII.

AMONG THE BREAKS.

ALL at once Adam Griff, who was some yards in advance, came to a dead halt. Edward did the same, and sat looking at him, waiting to be told the cause of the halt. Adam was gazing upward.

Instead of looking back, the trapper was seen to raise his

rifle and point it toward the sky, as if about to shoot something on the rocks above.

Our hero waited for the report, but it didn't come. After holding it to his shoulder for a full minute, the trapper lowered his gun, and as if undecided.

Then, turning in his saddle, he directed his companion, by a motion of his hand, to approach. The young hunter rode forward, and in a moment was beside the other.

"Did you see enemies?" he whispered.

"No," was the answer, "didn't see a human bein', nor any thing to be afeard on. Look—don't yer see that little animal 'way up thar to'ards the top of the cliff? Thar! did yer see it move?"

He was pointing. Edward's eyes followed the course of his finger, and far above them, toward the summit of the walls that hemmed them in, he saw an object that had the appearance of a small animal, standing on the very edge of a projecting rock.

"Does yer see it?"

"I do."

"Does yer know what 'tis?"

"If I could have the advantage of a little daylight I think I would have no hesitation in pronouncing its name," replied the young man, continuing to look, "but as it is, I can only guess. I believe, however, that it is a Rocky Mountain goat."

"That's jist what it is," returned Adam, smiling. "When I fust see'd him I thought I'd fotch him down fur dinner, but as soon as I drawed bead on the cuss I changed my mind. I thought the shot mought be heard by somebody as had no bizness to hear it, so I concluded to let the goat live."

"I thought," began Edward, "that you—"

He stopped abruptly, and his eyes dilated. The cause of the interruption was the crack of a rifle, very distinct yet seemingly far away. It echoed and reëchoed among the chills and cañons around them, causing the horses, as well as themselves, to prick up their ears with a startled air.

The hunters exchanged looks, as if with the expectation of reading the explanation in each other's face. Before a single word could be uttered, however, they were startled afresh by

the sound of a body rushing through the air, and a dull thump as it struck the ground close at hand!

They looked down. There at their horses' feet lay the dead body of the goat—the very goat which they had been looking at but a moment before, as it stood on the projecting rock far above them. An instant ago it was alive and thoughtless of danger; now it was silent in death, crushed and bleeding from its long fall. For a few seconds both were at a loss to know how this had happened, but for no longer.

"He's shot," said Adam, bending over his mare's neck to look more closely at the goat. "He's shot right through the noddle. Ef you'll look clus, you kin see whar the bullet hit him."

"I see," replied the other. "He is shot, and obviously by no other weapon than that whose report we just heard."

"Good Lord! Look!"

Just then a small dark figure darted into view, from behind a gigantic rock at some distance from where the goat had fallen, and came bounding toward them with a gun in hand.

Suddenly the figure stopped. It saw the two horsemen standing silently there in the pass, and it recoiled with an appearance of the utmost alarm. Then it wheeled as quick as lightning, and started to fly from the strange intruders. But nothing could have been quicker than the movements of the trapper at that moment. His long rifle leaped to his shoulder, as if it were endowed with life, and covered the figure with a deadly aim.

"Halt!" he thundered, and his stentorian voice rung through the gorge with startling distinctness. "Halt, you little imp, or you're meat for the wolves in the switch of a mule's tail!"

The "little imp" did pause, and glance back with a terrified air. Then he ran on two or three steps further, stopped again, turned square around and stood stock still, with his face toward the trapper.

"Come hyur," commanded Adam, sternly.

The figure hesitated—took one step—and hesitated again.

"Strut this way!" cried Adam, "or may I be shot myself ef I don't put a loophole cl'ar through you."

It was enough. The diminutive goat-slayer seemed to re-

gard implicit obedience the part of prudence on this occasion and he approached without further hesitation.

"By heaven!" exclaimed Edward, as the fellow came near, "it is the Indian dwarf, Solomon!"

"Wagh! I knowed it when he fust come in sight," said Adam, lowering his gun. "That's why I stopped him."

It was, indeed, Solomon. His ugly weazen face expressed nothing but terror and conscious guilt, and the angry looks bestowed upon him by the white hunters were not calculated to put his tortured mind at rest. As he came up, he glanced furtively from one to the other, and then looked down at the goat without a word.

"Did *you* kill that goat?" asked the old scout, gruffly.

The Indian nodded without looking up.

The trapper regarded him for awhile in silence, and then, with an angry frown, demanded:

"What are you in this part of the kentry fur?"

"Me live here now," said Solomon, attempting to put on a bold face.

"Do, eh? What did you leave Fort Binkley fur?"

"Ugh! me no like to live dere. Like pale-faces much—like wild life better. Like de prairies—like mountains—like much hunt—no like to be tame. Wagh!"

"Give that clapper a holiday, you pesky lyin' imp, or I'll clip yer skulp-lock!" ejaculated the trapper, in a rage. "Do you s'pose you kin pull the wool over Adam Griff's peepers? When yer does, jist let me know. Got tired livin' at the fort, did yer? Dod rot yer hide! yer'll want to git back thar 'fore you kin ever muster up curridge to go. The people wouldn't leave enough of you to grease a baby's ha'r, ef you'd show yer painted mug inside them walls, and I don't know but I better tan yer hide a trill, jist to show you what opinion I have of you. You kin tremble now, but I opine you kin do it with better cause 'fore long. You're a blasted little traitor, and you deserve to be strung up. The whites served you a good turn when yer own people kicked you out of thar lodges, and this is the way you return it."

Solomon shrunk back a little at this outburst, and looked more frightened than before.

"Lay down yer gun," commanded the scout.

The dwarf dropped his gun without a word of remonstrance.

"Ef you've got other weepins, throw 'em away."

He brought to light a knife and a hatchet, and cast them upon the ground with commendable docility.

"Now you're in our power," continued Adam, looking fiercely at him. "I reckon yer knows what we ought to do with yer? You've turned traitor to yer best friends, you had a hand in the captur' of the kurnel and his gal, and you're doin' dirty work fur that blasted hell-hound, Turk Redby."

"No, no," returned the Indian, hastily; "me no do work for Turk Redby. Who told you so?"

"Shet up! Yer can't fool me. 'Twar only the day afore yesterday that you tried to carry off Marian Howarth, and you told her then as how Turk Redby hired you to do it. Hain't furgot that, have yer? I see yer hain't, and you'll find out thar's others remembers it besides you, afore we're done with you. I s'pect we'll have to try the strength of this rope with you," concluded the trapper, looking coolly down at the lariat suspended at his saddle-bow.

Solomon ceased trembling at once, drew himself up to his fullest hight and folded his arms over his chest. He firmly believed that his time had come—that his captors would show no mercy whatever in the infliction of his punishment—that death, in the horrible form of hanging by the neck, was to be administered to him—and he immediately assumed that air of stoical indifference, proverbial with his race. He was outwardly calm, but his thin lips were compressed, and his black, snake-like orbs gleamed with an unnatural brightness.

Adam Griff could not repress a smile.

"Are you ready to kick the bucket?" he asked.

"Solomon never 'fraid to die," was the hearty rejoinder.

"Bosh! you're skeered clear out of yer wits. Tell *me* you're not afeard to die. Wal, it's the natur' of reds to put on airs when the time comes to turn up thar toes, though I'll sw'ar every one on 'em is cowards. Afore we stretch yer juggler, howsomever, you may jist tell us whar Redby and the captives are?"

Solomon smiled contemptuously.

"Nebber tell dat," he said, firmly.

"Cut yer throat, ef you don't."

"Sooner be throat cut than hang."

Adam laughed quietly, for, to tell the truth, his mind was made up how he should act, at the first appearance of Solomon, and had been talking of revenge and punishment merely to frighten the traitor. Having proceeded to an extremity in that strain, he now became serious.

"See hyur, Injun," he began, sliding out of his saddle and standing before the dwarf, "you'll do well to pick yer ears now, fur I've got a proposition to make. I reckon you'd ruther live than die?"

The savage brightened up, and listened eagerly.

"I take it fur settled that you'd ruther live than die," pursued the scout. "Now, ef you'll tell whar Turk Redby is, whar Colonel Howarth and the gal is, and how many assistants the outlaw has got, we'll let you go scot-free."

"No kill?" asked the Indian, excitedly.

"Won't hurt you," was the emphatic response.

"Good!"

"You agree, then?"

The Indian nodded assent.

"All right," said Adam. "Git down off your hoss, Edward, and let's make a dinner of this goat, while we hear what the red-skin has to say. We've got the right thread in our clutches now, and we'll do some tall pullin' 'fore we let go."

The horses were hitched, the deepest recess in view was selected for the fire, which was speedily kindled, and the three men were soon enjoying a repast prepared from the choicest portions of the goat.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DINNER PARTY INTERRUPTED.

IN consequence of Solomon's ignorance of the language, we will undertake to render into comprehensible English the information drawn from him by the two hunters. He gave it while they were eating, and the whites were not nearly so interested in the food before them as they were in the narrator.

In the first place, according to the story here told, Turk Redby had returned to the neighborhood of Fort Binkley, both to obtain the revenge he had sworn to have, and to steal Marian Howarth from her home. He was accompanied by a man named Dan Sykes, who was as great a villain as Redby himself, and it was these two wretches, together with Solomon, who had captured Colonel Howarth and daughter on the preceding day. As this fact was made known to our friends, Edward gave Adam a look of triumph, and Adam withdrew the blame which his superstitious ideas had prompted him to settle upon the Specter Riders.

It will be remembered that blood was found by the trailers, on the spot where the attack had been made. This had been caused by a shot from Turk Redby, aimed at Colonel Howarth with deadly intent. The colonel had fallen from his horse, and at first was thought to be dead, as the blood flowed copiously from his forehead, but an examination had shown that he was only stunned. The bullet, instead of penetrating the skull, had plowed its way beneath his scalp and come out near the top of his head, inflicting a painful, but by no means dangerous wound. He was speedily resuscitated, his head bandaged, and was then made a prisoner with his daughter.

Redby admired the white steed, Cherokee, and was not long in deciding that it should change places with his own. But, during the night after reaching the den in the breaks, Colonel Howarth succeeded in freeing himself from the cords

that bound him, and made an effort toward escape, evidently with the hope of reaching Fort Binkley, and returning with sufficient aid for the rescue of the girl, and the annihilation of the desperadoes. But for his wound he might have succeeded; as it was, on reaching the spot where the horses were grouped together, he found himself too weak to mount any of them, and growing weaker every moment. This was caused by his wound bleeding afresh, it having begun without his knowledge some time before. His senses were nearly gone, but he conceived a simple plan, which he hastily put into execution. Lifting his hand to his head, he wet his fingers with his own blood and wrote the word "Help!" in large letters on Cherokee's snowy side, setting the animal free, with a vague idea that he would carry the message to his master, and thus bring somebody to the assistance of Marian and himself. He had no sooner accomplished this than he fell fainting on the ground.

The desperado was highly enraged by the loss of his prize, the white charger, and beyond a doubt would have murdered the colonel had not Dan Sykes, his companion, interfered.

Upon being asked what the intentions of the outlaws were regarding the prisoners, Solomon replied that he could not say positively, but believed that the colonel was to be put to death in some horrible manner.

"And Marian?" asked Edward, eagerly.

"She no die," returned the Indian, with a malicious grin. "She be de wife of Turk."

"Never, while I live!" cried Edward, vehemently. "Abominable wretch! if he harms a hair of that innocent girl's head, or forces her to act contrary to her will, by Heaven he shall suffer death for it, if it is twenty years from now!"

"Hyur's a grizzly's claw on that, youngster," said the trapper, earnestly, as he extended his hand, "and I opine the bloody devil had better go under whether he hurts her or not. He's done enough, cuss his rotten hide, and ef he thinks he kin make a target out of the kurnel without gittin' his ear warped, he must be out of his head."

"What shall we do?"

"Wal, as to that, we'll have to wait till we find out whar they be afore we do any thing."

"Very true. Where can we find them, Solomon?"

"Me can't tell," replied Solomon; "me show—me take you to de place—me can't tell."

"You mean you haven't sufficient command of words to direct us to the outlaw's abode, but that you are ready to lead us to it? Well, that is enough, I suppose. We shall not want to attempt the rescue until after nightfall, shall we, Adam?"

"No," replied the trapper, thoughtfully, as he swallowed the last mouthful of his dinner, and began to fill his pipe. "I never did b'lieve in rushin' matters of this sort, though I'll sw'ar nobody's more ag'in' losin' time than I be. 'Thar'll be a better show fur success, after dark, that's sartin."

"Until night, then, we will wait, and under cover of the darkness something must be done."

"But," continued Adam, fastening his keen orbs upon the Indian, "thar ain't no use in that cuss tellin' us as how he can't direct us to Redby's hidin' place, 'thout goin' hisself, 'cause I know it's all moonshine. He kin ef he wants to, and he shan't be our guide to-night, that's all. He ain't to be trusted. See 'yur, red-skin, you kin jist tell us now or not at all, whar we'll be most likely to find the captives, and let me remark at this p'int that you won't profit a great deal by tellin' a lie."

Solomon looked somewhat confused, and gazed steadfastly at the ground before replying. But, conscious that there was no help for it, he said:

"Me tell best me kin. No do good—no talk pale-face tongue much—do best know how."

"No, I'll be hanged if you do!" cried a stentorian voice, at that moment—a voice that rung through the gorge like the roar of a wild animal, and caused the three men to start violently, grasp their guns and glance hurriedly around.

The sound of the voice was still in the air when the echoes were increased by the clear crack of a rifle near by, and a bullet flattened itself against a rock right behind Solomon's head, causing that diminutive personage to shrink into still smaller dimensions, as it seemed.

"Wolves and witches!" ejaculated the trapper, darting up to his full height as quickly as a serpent could uncoil itself.

He had no time to say more. While the rifle-shot was still reverberating from cliff to cliff, a shadowy figure flitted before the eyes of the astonished trio, and vanished so quickly that they could hardly have sworn they had seen it.

Adam Griff was the first to move, then. Like a dog after a rat, he sprung forward with the velocity of a racer—out of the dark recess into the cañon—and was gone, leaving Edward and the red dwarf sitting there alone.

Edward kept his seat, and commanded the Indian to do likewise. In almost speechless silence they waited anxiously for some sound—a cry—the report of a rifle—returning footsteps—any thing that would tell them the race was at an end, and would give them even a slight intimation of the result of Adam's pursuit of a shadow. For, as yet, neither was convinced that what they had seen was any thing more than a shadow.

CHAPTER XV.

A CAPTURE AND AN ESCAPE.

FULL ten minutes passed away before the trapper returned, but when he did, it was not alone.

They first heard the sound of his footsteps outside, mingled with others, and his gruff, rumbling voice apparently addressing somebody in short sentences, without eliciting a single audible answer. Then he came in sight, and walked straight into the recess, leading a man by the collar of his coat.

This man was a villainous-looking wretch, habited in half-hunter's costume, with glittering, deep-set eyes, low forehead, matted hair and heavy beard. He was short and stumpy, with a thick, ball-like neck and a broad, hairy breast, which was partly exposed. He was armed to the teeth, but just now his weapons might have been so many sticks, for all the use they were to him, since his hands were tied securely together behind him.

He scowled ferociously, and made a slight movement as if half-decided to make an effort toward escape, as his captor led

him into the presence of Westlake and the Indian. But Adam jerked him forward with a force that almost threw him off his feet, and pushed him rudely into the furthest corner of the recess.

"Stand thar, you miser'ble wolf-cub!" he commanded, sternly, "and take keer that you don't move a step out of yer tracks, fur ef you do, I'll take it as a signal that you're tired of life."

"He warn't hard to ketch," added the trapper, turning to Edward, "but arter I'd ketched him, I'm bound to swar we had a powerful tough wrastle afore I could get him tied. Thar's muscle in his make-up, and hyur's as thought I'd met my match fur sarin when I found him so hard to git the upper hand of."

"Who is he?" inquired Edward, looking curiously at him.

"I axed him what his handle war two or three times," replied the scout, "but I couldn't git no satisfaction out of him. He's as stubborn as the man in the moon 'bout talkin'. Howsomever, I calc'late he's Turk Redby's kunrid, and ef anybody knows any thing 'bout it I reckon Solomon ort to. How is it, Solomon? Ain't this chap Redby's friend?"

Solomon was silent. He appeared unable to look anybody in the eyes just then, and, as the most natural alternative, he looked at the ground, which had no eyes.

"Ain't this chap Redby's friend?" repeated the scout, in a tone that made the Indian tremble.

"Yes," was the low reply.

"His 'handle, then, is Dan Sykes?"

"Yes."

"Jist as I s'pected."

"Curse you for a little traitor!" hissed the prisoner, white with passion as he looked down upon the cowering dwarf. "You have told them the truth; my name is Dan Sykes, and I *am* the friend of Turk Redby. I will not deny it, but if my hands were free at this moment I would make you suffer for this act of low cowardice and treason. I heard the story as you told it to these men, and it was I who shot at you. My hand trembled, and the bullet missed

you, more's the pity; but if I could have one more shot at your infernal mug, I'm blowed if your brain-pan wouldn't receive its first introduction to cold-lead!"

"S'pose you give the red-skin a rest, and listen to me a minute," coolly interrupted Adam. "You and Reddy can't blame anybody but yerselves fur takin' that little cuss into yer sarvice, 'cause you knowed when you done it that he was a traitor to the people of Fort Binkley, and he was jist as like to turn out the same with you. Thar ain't no use trustin' a man what'll go back on his best friends fur gold, and that's what he done. I acknowledge he needs more killin' than he'll ever get, but when yer comes down to that, thar's another one, less'n a hundred miles from hyur, as stands in the same need."

The outlaw looked terribly ferocious.

"Who's that?" he demanded, shortly.

"That are Dan Sykes," was the imperturbable rejoinder.

The outlaw had nothing more to say, but he ground his teeth; his rage was at white heat. He looked vindictively at Solomon, bestowed a savage glance upon Edward and the old scout, and then ran his eyes along the ground from his feet to the entrance of the recess, as though already measuring the distance, in contemplation of a dash for freedom.

"Now see 'yur, Sykes," said Adam, leaning on his rifle and gazing squarely at the person addressed, "it strikes me that you kin throw a little light on a sartin subject, ef you're a mind to—"

"It strikes me that I ain't a mind to," interposed the man, sullenly.

"Jist hear me through, ef yer has any respect fur yer provision basket," resumed Adam, undisturbed. "I'm goin' to ax you a question or two, and —"

"An I I won't answer 'em," interrupted the man, again.

"Shet up, you low seam of creation!" cried the trapper, in a tone that had the desired effect. "You *will* answer my questions; I *know* you will; 'cause I'm sare you'd rather discommode yerself a little, than to have a loop-hole drilled through the upper extremity of yer length. Now, in the fust place, I want yer to tell me ef Colonel Howarth and that ar' gal of his'n are dead or alive?"

The villain hesitated.

Click! went the hammer of the trapper's rifle.

"They are both alive," said Dan Sykes, quickly.

"You'll sw'ar to that?"

"A dozen times, if you wish."

"Has either one on 'em been harmed?"

"The colonel was wounded on the head when he was captured. Nothing to speak of."

"They are still in Turk Redby's power?"

"They are."

"Wal, you tell jist the same thing that Solomon tells, and I reckon thar must be some truth in it. But thar's sunk-thin' we hain't found out yit, and that I s'pose we'll have to l'arn from you. Whar kin we find our friends? Whar is Redby keepin' 'em?"

The desperado was silent. But a few minutes ago he had been an eavesdropper to the conversation of the little dinner-party, and had heard the information drawn from Solomon in the same manner that it was now being drawn from him. He had fired at the Indian then, with intent to kill, simply to prevent him from telling where the captives might be found; and now that he was placed, quite unexpectedly, in the same position recently occupied by the dwarf, he inwardly resolved that he would not be so cowardly and inconsistent as to make the treasonable revelation required of him.

"Are you goin' to tell?" asked Adam, coolly.

"No!" was the dogged response.

Click! went the rifle again.

The man started and turned pale, but he did not speak.

"Thar ain't to be any foolishness 'bout this," said the trapper, and his tone expressed a terrible determination. "Adam Griff are a b'ar that means prezactly what he sez, every time, and thinks no more of killin' a man of your stripe than he would of pluggin' the noddle of a Crow Injun. Now, we won't give you five minutes to open yer mouth and tell us all yer knows 'bout—"

The sentence remained forever incomplete. With a movement as quick as lightning, the desperado leaped forward, and hurled himself with all possible force against the

trapper, causing that personage to measure his length on the ground. Then, with a roar of defiance, he bounded over the prostrate form and was off with the speed of a deer!

But Edward Westlake was never slow to act, nor was he on this occasion. With a celerity that equaled that of his enemy, he seized his gun and darted out of the recess in pursuit of the outlaw, leaving his defeated companion to pick himself up at leisure.

Solomon was startled half out of his wits by the suddenness of these movements but even in his bewilderment it flashed across his mind that this was his time to escape. So he jumped up with the intention of bolting out in the tracks of his two predecessors, but before he could move a step, a pair of hands was laid roughly on his shoulders, and he was hurled backward upon the stones with a violence that made him cry out with pain.

It was Adam Griff who thus checked the flight of the dwarf, even before it was begun.

"Lay thar, you little imp!" he said, gruffly. "Ef that other cuss gits away you'll stay with us awhile longer, that's all. We can't afford to lose both of you—nor even one of you, ef we can help it. Cuss that reprobate! he e'ena'most knocked the wind out of me. I wish I had him by the ha'r. Lay still now, while I tie you, 'cause I hain't no time to play, and ef yer moves a muscle this toothpick 'll pin you to the ground in the shake of a b'ar's tail!"

While speaking he was also producing some pieces of cord, an ample supply of which he invariably carried about his person, in view of emergencies that would make it useful.

As he ceased speaking he began hastily to bind the Indian hand and foot, to prevent the possibility of another attempt at flight. Fearing the threatened consequences of a resistance, the Indian did not move while he was being bound, though he did venture to remonstrate.

"You no keep promise," he exclaimed, vehemently. "You say you let me go when I tell all 'bout Redby."

"Wagh! you hain't told yit," said Adam. "You hain't told whar Redby's den is."

"Me tell *now*," said the savage, brightening up.

"No yer won't. I hain't time to listen now. I'll hear

all you've got to say when I come back, and my reason fur tyin' you is to keep you hyur till I do come back."

So saying he left the dwarf in his helpless condition, and strode out of the recess into the gorge.

Here he paused. A look of uneasiness swept over his features. The man, Dan Sykes, was not in sight—neither was Edward Westlake. Not a living thing was visible to his eyes.

He looked in both directions, and listened intently. Nothing was to be seen or heard.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE OUTLAW'S DEN.

WHEN Edward Westlake rushed out of the recess in pursuit of the desperado, it was with a vague understanding that he must recapture him, or run a great risk of losing Marian forever! It would not do, by any means, he thought, to let the villain reach his haunt in safety, as he would be sure to give Turk Redby warning of their danger; and the latter, if he should find it useless to attempt to fly with the captives, would, in all probability, murder them both before making good his own escape.

This was the thought that flashed across Edward's mind, and incited him to give chase; and he strained every muscle to its utmost tension in his endeavor to overhaul the fugitive.

Up the cañon they sped, at an astonishing rate, both of them proving in a moment their fleetness of foot and their intense anxiety for the issue of the impromptu race. The outlaw's hands were still tied behind him, and indeed they bid fair to remain so until freed by somebody else, but apparently this was no impediment to his progress. It was a matter of life and death with him—with Edward it was even more than that.

After running about a quarter of a mile from the starting point, the racers came to a place where the pass made an abrupt turn to the right.

The outlaw rounded the bend with unabated speed, and was out of sight in a second. But our hero was not far behind. More swiftly than he had ever run before, he sped forward like a rocket. Unlike his enemy, however, he stopped short in the turn of the pass and lifted his rifle to his shoulder. From this point the cañon was very narrow and crooked, and so clogged in many places by *debris* from the lofty hills on either side, that it was rendered difficult of travel. Our hero, as he looked along the obstructed avenue, saw the outlaw still retreating as rapidly as possible, leaping from rock to rock with the agility and recklessness of a mountain goat.

Westlake's decision was made. Pressing his gun to his shoulder, he took quick but sure aim at the flying figure, and the hammer fell. There was a sharp click, and the powder flashed in the pan! The gun retained its charge, and the man lived. Westlake looked down to see what ailed the weapon, but only for a moment. He concluded that he had no time to prime it afresh, and that he must get much closer to the fugitive before again bringing it into requisition.

But he had taken only two long bounds when he stopped again. This time the halt was very sudden indeed, and the butt of his rifle struck the ground with a ring, and his eyes and mouth flew open, and he was the very picture of intense amazement.

The outlaw had disappeared. He was nowhere to be seen. Look whichever way he would, not even the trace of a living thing was visible. To all appearance, Edward was entirely alone in the gorge.

What had become of the villain? Where had he gone so suddenly? Edward's first thought was that he had dived into some crevice or cavern—probably the very place so anxiously looked for: the lurking-place of Turk Redby.

This thought excited him, and he hurried forward once more. He went with much less speed now than he had previously practiced, firstly because the way had grown less smooth, and secondly for the purpose of keeping a sharp look-out on both sides of the gorge, in order to discover, if possible, the cave or gulch which had swallowed up the desperado.

In this he was unsuccessful. He went on, and on, until he knew there was no necessity of going further, and then he paused. He was perplexed and vexed. He was positive the fellow had not gone so far, before he had lost sight of him, and yet he had found no place where the wretch could have hidden. Half despairing, he turned about and began to retrace his steps, slowly and reluctantly, still scanning the walls on either hand, with a hope that he might yet find what he had overlooked before: a clue to the villain's whereabouts.

He had not proceeded far on his return, when all of a sudden he was startled by a hoarse voice, exclaiming:

"Rash fool! in following me you have overtaken death. Take that, you coward!"

Edward whirled round at the sound of this voice, and the first thing he saw was a human head, within a few feet of where he stood. It was all he could see, and it was raised above the edge of a rock, behind which the rest of the body was concealed. He only obtained a glimpse of the head, for at the very moment he turned it was concealed by a cloud of smoke that suddenly sprung into existence, and the jarring report of a pistol echoed through the gorge. The bullet whistled by so close to his ear that he dodged involuntarily.

When the smoke cleared away, the young man lifted his rifle and looked for the head. But it was gone.

However, he was a victim of impulses to-day, and he resolved to follow the villain, cost what it might. He knew it was Dan Sykes who had shot at him; even in that one glimpse he had recognized the face.

With one leap he mounted the rock, and stood upon the highest edge. He looked down behind it. Nobody was there, but that look put him in possession of a secret, and inspired him once more with brilliant hopes. There was a dark hole—an opening in the face of the cliff, of sufficient dimensions to admit the body of an ordinary man in a slightly stooping posture. It was the mouth of a cave, and in this cave Dan Sykes had undoubtedly taken refuge. This, and even more, was apparent to Edward. He believed he had stumbled upon that which he most desired to find—the den of Turk Redby.

Without the slightest hesitation, and without a thought of what might be the consequence of such an act, he jumped down behind the rock, bent his body almost double, and fairly dove into the cavern.

It was dark as pitch inside, and nothing was to be heard save his own heavy breathing and the sound of his footsteps, but he went fearlessly on, holding his gun in advance, at arm's length. He groped his way through a short, narrow passage, and then—notwithstanding the darkness was still intense—he became aware that he had emerged into an apartment of considerable dimensions. He paused then, stood erect and listened. He heard nothing. He endeavored to penetrate the heavy gloom with his keen eyes. The effort could have been no less fruitless had it been a stone wall he was endeavoring to see through. A feeling of uneasiness came over him now for the first time, for it is a fact well known that there have been times when mere darkness and silence have produced uneasiness in the stoutest hearts. He was confident that he was in the outlaws' cave, and he felt that the outlaws knew it—that he was watched, and that he had placed himself in their power.

Hark! what was that he heard? A scream? Yes, it was! Beyond a doubt it *was* a scream, and one that told its author was in distress. Moreover, it was a female voice. There could be no uncertainty about that. Edward started as it fell upon his ear, for, although the cry was but faintly heard, as if it proceeded from a distant part of the cavern, far back under the hills, he still thought he recognized the voice.

“Marian! Marian!” he shouted, “I am coming! I am coming to save you!”

The last words were still quivering on his lips, when the far-off report of a pistol came rolling through the cavern, followed by another faint scream, and all was still again.

Edward bounded forward, regardless of darkness and danger—thinking only of her that was dearer to him than life—thinking only of her and her peril, and with a determination to rescue her or die in her defense. But it so happened that somebody was coming from the opposite direction at the same time and at no less speed. Suddenly a heavy body came

against the young man with such force as to almost jar the breath out of him, and he was unceremoniously brought to a stand-still. Before he could place himself on the defensive his gun was violently wrenched from his hands and dashed to the ground. Then a pair of rough hands seized him, and a hoarse voice roared in his ear:

"You're going to save her, are you? Ha! ha! ha! When you do, the sun will turn to blood! She is already saved. Did you hear that pistol-shot? The bullet pierced her brain! Ha! ha! ha!"

It was enough. Edward heard no more. These words set him wild, and endowed him with the strength of a giant. He did not seem to act by his own effort; his brain, his heart, his soul were as nothing; and the few moments that followed were a blank in his memory. He could never afterward give a clear account of what occurred, then. He had a dim recollection of grappling with a man in the dark, and of a desperate struggle, which might have lasted an hour or a minute, for all he knew. He was conscious of no more until he found himself, as it were, standing there alone, breathing huskily and holding a wet knife in his hand, while he could plainly hear the thick blood dripping slowly on the stone floor of the cave!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DESPERADO'S FLIGHT.

WHILE yet Edward was standing there, with the peculiar sensation of one slowly waking from a dream, a light flashed in his face, and brought him at once to a realization of his position.

He looked up with a start. He saw a man running toward him, holding a blazing torch in his hand. He was coming from the rear part of the cave, and, of course, was at once regarded as an enemy. The man was minus both hat and coat, and his head was bandaged as if he had recently been wounded.

Edward's fingers closed tightly around the handle of his knife, and he planted one foot behind the other with a look that showed he was determined to die fighting.

"Stand off, wretch!" he cried, in a ringing voice, "or advance at your peril. If you dare to approach within reach of this weapon your blood be upon your own head!"

The man with the bandaged head stopped short, held the torch above his face and looked immeasurably amazed.

"Westlake—Westlake! don't you know me?" he exclaimed, in a trembling voice. "Look at me! I am—"

"Colonel Howarth, by the seven wonders!" ejaculated Edward, recognizing him as he spoke; and dropping his knife he sprung forward to meet his friend.

"Thank God, you still live!" he cried, in a transport of joy, as he seized the colonel's hand and shook it warmly. "I thought you were an enemy. One minute ago I could not have hoped for this meeting."

"By Heaven's mercy I still live," replied the colonel, returning the young man's greeting with as much warmth as it was given. "Although, by to-morrow I could not have said so much for myself."

And a faint smile flickered over his pale features.

"I am glad to see you, Westlake," he added, in a stronger voice, "and more so because I know that you are here in behalf of myself and daughter. You are a brave and noble lad, and— Good gracious! sir, did you kill that man?"

His eyes, for the first time, alighted upon the silent, bloody figure stretched out at their feet.

"I—I suppose I did," replied Edward, looking down at his victim as if he did not clearly understand it, and then looking up again at his interrogator.

"One fiend less in the world," said Colonel Howarth, clinching his teeth. "This is Turk Redby's companion."

Edward bent upon the lifeless man a closer scrutiny, and discovered that such was the fact. It was Dan Sykes—and he was dead. There were ghastly knife-wounds in his breast and throat, and he was weltering in his blood.

"I suppose I killed him," said the young man, in a bewildered sort of a way, "though I hardly know how, or why."

‘No matter; you did a good deed when you took his life,’ said Colonel Howarth, speaking rapidly now, as if it had just occurred to him that time was precious. ‘The fellow came rushing in here awhile ago, with his hands tied behind him, exclaiming that he had been a captive, had escaped and was pursued. Redby cut the cord that bound his wrists, and then, without waiting a moment, Sykes snatched up a pistol and ran back to the mouth of the cave. We heard the report of his pistol, and supposed he had shot somebody, but a moment later he came back at the top of his speed, and announced vociferously that he had missed his aim. He told Redby to escape with the girl as quickly as possible, and he would cover his retreat.’

At this point in the explanation, Edward started and grasped the colonel’s arm. The glaring torch revealed a white face, and a pair of wildly-gleaming eyes.

‘I remember now,’ he said, in an icy whisper, ‘I remember now. This demon ran against me in the dark—he grappled with me—he roared in my ear that Marian was dead—shot through the brain by her captor! Yes, yes; I remember it now. My God! Colonel Howarth, the murderer of your daughter shall die for this. He shall die a thousand deaths if he had as many lives!’

‘Stop, my friend,’ interrupted the other; ‘you alarm me. Compose yourself, and listen to me. If this man told you Marian was dead, he told a base lie. She is not.’

‘Not dead? Thank God!’

‘She was not even shot at.’

‘But I heard the report of a pistol and a scream.’

‘The pistol was aimed at me,’ said the colonel, quietly. ‘When apprised of his danger, Turk Redby lifted Marian in his arms, in spite of her struggles and cries, and began to ascend the ladder which leads from the rear apartment to the open air. I was lying on the ground, bound hand and foot, and consequently helpless. When Redby was near the top of the ladder, he turned about, held Marian with his left arm, drew a pistol with his right hand, pointed it at me and fired. The bullet missed me, but he did not wait to observe the effect of his shot. He was gone in a moment, and gone with my daughter. I became frantic; I seemed possessed of su-

perhuman strength in my desperation, and, after two or three ineffectual attempts, I snapped the cords on my wrists. With the use of my hands, it was the work of a moment to set my feet free. I believed there were friends out here, and I came to meet them, and procure their assistance. And now let us waste no more time. Come, Westlake; will you go with me in pursuit of Marian's captor?"

"Will I?" echoed Edward, hurriedly picking up his gun and knife. "How can you ask me?"

"But stay!" added the colonel. "Where is Adam Griff? Didn't he accompany you hither?"

"He is not far away, but I came to the cave alone. We haven't time to go after him; besides, we do not need his help, since Redby is but one and we are two. Delay is a torture. Lead the way, and I will follow."

Colonel Howarth started back to the rear of the cave with long, rapid strides, closely followed by the youth. He held up the torch to light the way. Without it they could not have seen beyond the end of their noses, for there was not so much as a crevice to relieve the opacity of the substance between them and the heavens, and not a single ray of daylight was admitted to the subterranean vault.

After going through a long, wide passage they emerged into another apartment, which, the colonel explained, was the dwelling-place of Redby and Sykes, as well as the prison-chamber of himself and daughter. This room was not so spacious as the first one, but it had been slightly fitted up for a place of abode, for it contained two clumsy stools and a bench, in the way of furniture. Its greatest measure, by far, was its depth. The ceiling looked very high to Edward as he glanced upward, but to see it he did not have to depend upon the one torch they carried, as there were three or four others sticking in the walls around them.

On one side of the room was a rope-ladder, reaching from the floor to a sort of trap-door, as it appeared, in the ceiling.

This they prepared to ascend, as it was the course taken by Redby in his flight. Edward loosened his knife and pistols in his belt, and, after looking to the priming of his gun, he suspended that weapon across his back, in order to have

the free use of his hands. Colonel Howarth dropped the torch he carried, and was ready for pursuit.

Edward took the lead. Grasping the dangling ropes in a firm, resolute manner, and with a look which showed that nothing but death itself could stop him, he began to ascend. The colonel was not slow in following.

Up the trembling ladder they climbed, until they reached the ceiling. Here was a dark hole, which may be briefly described by simply intimating that it resembled the interior of a chimney, about five feet in length. Into this hole they squeezed their bodies, and continued to climb upward. At the top a flat stone had been laid over the aperture. This was easily removed, and the result a flood of daylight and a stream of fresh air.

The two men climbed out of the cavity, and found themselves upon a level table-land, overlooking a vast extent of broken country. Here they paused to look about them. That the day was nearly gone was shown by the position of the sun, which was slowly sinking behind the western hills, and kissing the tallest peaks with his last golden rays.

"Well, here we are," said Edward, speaking hurriedly to his companion. "How shall we proceed? Can you tell which direction it were better to follow?"

"I know not what to do. I must leave the guidance to you, young man. My head is not clear."

"*Help ! help ! help !*" screamed a female voice, at that moment. "Father ! Edward ! Save me—oh, save me !"

The two men whirled round simultaneously, in answer to the pleading cry. They beheld a sight that made Colonel Howarth clasp his hands, and caused Edward Westlake to unslung his rifle in the twinkling of an eye.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FATE OF THE BORDER FIEND.

AT no great distance from where they stood, they saw Turk Redby and Marian Howarth. They were on the very verge of the cliff, overlooking the gorge through which Edward had chased Dan Sykes, and at a point directly above the mouth of the cave.

When first seen by our friends, Redby had the girl by the wrists, trying to drag her along the edge of the precipice. He was cursing and threatening—she struggling and crying for help, while her hair was disheveled, her garments torn, and her face turned pleadingly toward her father and lover.

“Villain! Coward!” shouted Edward, leveling his rifle at the man. “Unhand that girl instantly!”

Quick as thought, the cunning wretch leaped behind the girl, and, grasping her arms with his sinewy hands, compelled her to stand between him and his enemies.

“Shoot, if you will,” he cried, with a mocking laugh. “Ha! ha! ha!”

Colonel Howarth and the young man looked at each other.

“What can we do?” exclaimed Edward.

“Rush upon the demon, and overpower him before he can escape,” replied the colonel, who, in his excitement, thought not once of his own danger should such a course be pursued.

Westlake shook his head.

“That would not do,” said he, in a tone that showed his utter disapproval of the plan. “The fellow could easily shoot one or both of us before we could reach him.”

As if he had overheard these remarks, Redby drew a pistol and deliberately pointed it at the two men, over the girl’s shoulder.

“Advance a step,” he cried, “and I fire. I warn you that I will not be taken alive, and also that this maiden shall not be separated from me alive. I will murder her before your

very eyes before I will allow you to regain possession of her."

There was a pause. Colonel Howarth looked at his young friend with pale face and knitted brows.

"Can we do nothing?" he asked, in a voice shaking with his intense emotions.

Before Edward could reply, Redby, with the weapon still pointed, cried out:

"I command you both to retire immediately, and leave me to go my way unmolested. Go back into the cave and out of my sight in less than one minute, or your bones shall be left to bleach upon this hill."

At that instant—just as the last word fell from the villain's mouth—all distinctly heard the crack of a rifle in the cañon below. The next second Turk Redby was seen to give a violent start, release Marian from his grasp, stagger and reel like a drunken man; and then, throwing up his hands with a wild, unearthly shriek, he fell backward over the edge of the cliff, and disappeared!

No sooner did Marian see that she was at liberty, than she gave utterance to a joyful cry and ran toward her friends, realizing only that she was free, and not that her captor had met with death in one of its most horrible shapes.

"Father! Edward!" she cried, and in another moment she lay panting on her lover's breast, while he gently pushed back her damp hair and imprinted a kiss on her forehead.

"Darling!" he murmured, "God alone knows my happiness at this moment."

"I may judge it by my own," she answered, tremulously.

"And I by mine," said the colonel, with beaming face.

"This is a happy hour, indeed!"

And he kissed his daughter affectionately.

"But who fired the shot that killed Turk Redby?" he asked, a moment later.

"Is Turk Redby killed?" cried Marian, looking toward the spot where he had stood holding her.

"If not he must have a charmed life. He fell over the cliff."

"I think it was Adam Griff who fired that shot," said Ed-

ward. "Indeed, whether he was the marksman or not, I would take my oath that it was the report of his rifle we heard."

"We can settle that question by seeing for ourselves," observed the colonel. "Come; let us go. The sun is fast going down, and I see no necessity for wasting more time here."

Without further delay, they turned to the chimney-like aperture which led to the cavern below. Marian assumed the lead. Laughing at the idea of assistance, when it was offered her, she lowered herself into the dark hole and began to climb down the rope ladder.

The men followed her, and in a few moments they were all standing together in the rear apartment of the cave.

Colonel Howarth extinguished every torch but one, and that one he took in his hand to light their way out. Bidding the others follow, he went ahead with the light, and they moved on through the long passage toward the mouth of the cave. In the front apartment they found the bloody form of Dan Sykes, lying just as he had fallen when Edward Westlake's knife pierced his villainous heart. They merely glanced at the corpse, and passed on in solemn silence.

As they emerged from the cave, the first person they saw was old Adam Griff. He was standing on the opposite side of the gorge, leaning on his long rifle in an attitude habitual with him, apparently waiting for them. A broad smile illumined his visage as the trio appeared, and he came forward to meet them with hand extended.

"Lord bless you, kurnel, this *is* you, ain't it, with yer head done up in a rag? And hyur *you* are, little 'un," said the scout, laying his hand on Marian's head, "lookin' as well as ever, 'cept you're sorter pale, like. Wal, youngster, I reckon we're well paid fur comin'; ain't we?"

"A thousand times paid," answered Edward, warmly.

"But Turk Redby—where is he?" inquired Colonel Howarth. "You shot him, Adam, did you not?"

"Calc'late I did," replied Adam, with a smile.

"And he fell from the cliff?"

"Wal, he didn't do nothin' else."

"Then where is his body?"

"I dragged his carkidge into that niche, yender. I thort as how it warn't jist the sight fur the gal to look at."

Marian shuddered and turned her face away, but her father and Edward approached the niche referred to by the trapper, and looked in. There, sure enough, was the crushed and mangled body of the desperado, Turk Redby. His clothes were badly torn, and fairly saturated with blood; his face was frightfully cut and bruised; his hair was clotted with sickly gore; his eyes and mouth were wide open, and his teeth were revealed in all their grinning ghastliness.

"Let the poor chap rest," said Adam, solemnly. "Him and his chum have both passed in their checks, and thar ain't nothin' more to be feared from 'em. So we'll jist leave 'em to rest. Let's go back to whar we left Solomon and the hosses."

And taking the lead himself, he conducted them all back to that part of the cañon where he and Edward had first stopped after their entrance. They found their animals just as they had left them, and in the recess, where they had dined, lay Solomon the dwarf, bound hand and foot, the work of Adam Griff.

"The trapper released him.

"You kin git up now, Injun," said he, "'cause I reckon thar's no danger of your cuttin' sticks while we've got our peepers on you. Ef you do, I've got a pill ready that you kin take."

"Let him go," said Marian. "Surely you do not wish to be troubled by him, when it is necessary that we should make the best of our time just now, and get out of these breaks before nightfall. It will be utterly impossible to travel over that perilous path in safety after dark. But stay!" she added, with a sudden change of tone; "you forgot to bring your horse, father, and there are only two here. Our progress will be very slow indeed, if you are thoughtless enough to leave your horse."

"Wait a bit," interrupted the trapper. "I've made up my mind that we won't leave the breaks to-night. Thar's no need of gittin' in a hurry now, arter all the danger's over. We all need rest—'specially you and yer father—and so we'll stay right on this spot till mornin'. As fur Solomon—wal, he kin lodge with us over night."

"I will go back to the cave after my horse, immediately,"

said the colonel, "and I will bring Redby's horse for your use, my dear. He will never ride him more."

No objections were offered to this plan. Colonel Howarth departed, and soon returned with two horses, one carrying Marian's saddle and the other his own. These were given a place with the other animals.

It was agreed all around that they should stop there until the next morning, since Turk Redby was forever silenced, and the lost ones were found.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SPECTER RIDERS.

NIGHT closed in, and it was dark to the last degree in the gorge. A roaring fire was built in the recess, however, brilliantly lighting up the immediate vicinity, and casting grotesque shadows on the cold gray walls around. The little group of five, including Solomon, inclosed the fire in a circle by gathering around it, and all resigned themselves to the pleasant duty of preparing and discussing the evening meal, which, in the absence of a better dish, consisted chiefly of goat-flesh. Strangely enough, no one thought of danger now, although they were in a part of the country inhabited by hostile and barbarous savages, and could scarcely have felt safe under ordinary circumstances. But, after what had occurred—after their fortunate success in the rescue of the captives, and the punishment of their captors—it became a prevalent feeling that Providence had interfered in their behalf, and that they were therefore safe under such protection.

Supper was over; but no one thought of courting the spirit of slumber, as yet. They were conversing cheerfully, and on various topics, when Alvin Griff started them all by breaking off in the middle of a sentence, and commanding silence.

The command was no sooner given than obeyed. All looked at Adam in blank surprise.

"What do you mean? What is the matter?" Edward ventured.

"Hush! Listen!" admonished the trapper, in a low, clear tone, raising one finger to his ear, and setting the example by listening intently himself.

All did as they were advised.

"Does you hear sunkthin'?" inquired the scout.

"I do," responded Colonel Howarth, promptly.

"And I," cried Edward and Marian in a breath; while Solomon held his peace, though he showed by the look he wore that he heard it also.

"What is it?" asked the colonel, with dilated eyes.

"I can't guess," returned the scout, shaking his head.

"There is somebody or something wandering abroad to-night," asserted Edward, "and not far away, I should judge."

"Somebody besides ourselves have blundered into these parts, that's sartin," said Adam, confidently.

"Hark! do you hear that?" exclaimed the colonel.

"By Heaven! there are horsemen in the gorge!" cried Westlake, springing to his feet.

"Get yer guns ready," came the clear, steady voice of Adam Griff, "and don't fire till I give the word."

The little camp was immediately in a state of confusion. The fire was allowed to live, but the three men ranged themselves behind it where they could not be seen from the gorge, and pressed Marian and the dwarf back into the remotest corners.

The clatter of horses' hoofs was heard—horses that were evidently coming up the pass at headlong speed!

Were they mounted by Indians? Not a human voice was heard, to tell whether they were mounted at all or not, but the thought of Indians dwelt in every mind.

"They are coming like the wind," whispered Edward, hastily. "I wonder how they entered the cañon, when it is so very dark?"

"Probably there is more than one way of entering," suggested the officer, in the same low tone.

"Hold yer arms ready, boys," muttered the trapper. "I opine they're reds, and they can't help knowin' we're hyur, 'cause they can see the fire. I'm afeard they'll stampede our animals, but we can't do nothin'. Now—ready—"

At that instant the horses came dashing past. They were in sight only a moment, three powerful steeds—three human skeletons—three white sheets flying in the wind—and that was all. They came and went in a breath. Swift as arrows they flitted by in the flickering firelight, and went thundering on up the gorge, almost before they could be distinctly seen.

Not a shot had been fired. The three men looked at one another in astonishment.

"*The Specter Riders!*" ejaculated Colonel Howarth, in excited tones. "I had nearly forgotten them."

"They *are* the Specter Riders, sure's shootin'!" exclaimed the trapper, with a trifle less composure than he had shown a minute before.

"Come with me!" shouted Edward Westlake, in a thrilling voice. "Now is our chance to unravel this mystery! Come on! They can not escape us now!"

And, without waiting to see whether they intended to follow or not, he bounded past the fire like an antelope, and quick as thought was out of the recess into the gloomy gorge.

Adam Griff and Colonel Howarth darted after him, as if compelled by the words of the young man to follow. The colonel paused a moment in the entrance of the recess.

"Marian!" he cried, looking back, "here is my gun. Take it, and stand guard over that Indian!"

He tossed the gun toward her, and was gone the same instant.

Besides being a brave girl, Marian was cool-headed enough to be an army General, and her father's weapon had scarcely touched the ground when she had it in her hands, ready to make a remorseless presentation of the entire charge to Solomon on his first attempt to escape.

The three men were no sooner beyond the circle of the fire than they found themselves enshrouded in total darkness. At the same time they heard a confused trampling and clat-

tering of hoofs a short distance ahead—a jumping and plunging, as if the horses had encountered an obstacle.

“It is the bend in the pass!” cried Adam, in his loud, ringing voice. “They don’t know which way to turn. Come on—quick! Now or never!”

They rushed forward, regardless of the awful gloom—rushed forward through the dark cañon together, determined to make one desperate effort to tear away the vail of mystery that hung over the Specter Riders.

They rushed in among the plunging horses, and closed with them in a fierce struggle. The animals were wild with fright, and tried hard to escape, but a pair of strong hands grasped the reins of each, and held on with stubborn tenacity in spite of their rearing and kicking.

A minute sufficed to quiet the alarmed steeds, and every one of them was a captive.

The skeletons were silent as ever.

With a strange, uncomfortable feeling that they were in the presence of supernatural beings, the victors led their prizes back to the camp, in all haste.

Here, stopping in the brilliant glare of the firelight, they proceeded to examine the weird horsemen with curious eyes, the trapper at first holding back a little at the dictation of his superstitious fancy. Three fine-looking horses, somewhat shy and difficult to keep in check, all saddled and bridled and well shod, as if they were the property of civilized mortals. The bones of three human beings, white and fleshless, sitting erect in the saddle like living things, with horribly-grinning teeth, and dull, staring, eyeless sockets. Each wore a sheet folded loosely about its shoulders. A closer scrutiny revealed the fact that the skeletons were tied to the horses, and that they were held in their upright position by small, stiff wires, which were entirely invisible at a distance of two or three yards.

“The whole thing is nothing but a horrible joke,” observed Colonel Howarth, stepping back and continuing to gaze at the odd-looking trio. “Only a horrible joke. These horses have been wandering at will, and not at the will of their riders.”

Adam Griff said he would “knock under,” and acknowl-

edge himself wrong in his opinion that the Specter Riders were "sperrits."

"Hallo! what is this?" exclaimed Edward, at that juncture.

As he gave utterance to this excited exclamation, he was seen to withdraw something from beneath one of the saddles. It was a piece of paper, folded to a small size. Mechanically he unfolded it, and spread it out in his hands, while the others looked on with eager faces. There was writing on it. Edward held it toward the fire, and read aloud the following words written thereon:

"The riders of these horses are the mortal remains of three men from Fort Binkley, named respectively Simon Dawes, Dean Potter and Joe Crampton, and the animals are their own. These were the men who inflicted upon me a severe punishment at the whipping-post, and when I have added their commander, Colonel Howarth, to the number of my victims, and turned his skeleton loose in this same manner, my revenge will be complete."
TURK REDBY.

CHAPTER XX.

AS A NATURAL CONSEQUENCE.

HERE was a complete solution to the mystery of the Specter Riders, which had created so much excitement in and around Fort Binkley, and here, also, was an end to the uncertainty concerning the fate of the three missing men. Alas! even that uncertainty was better than the painful reality. Nothing could have been more horrible than the revenge of that human fiend, whose very love of murder had led him to the worst kind of barbarity. Adam Griff ground his teeth, and muttered something to the effect that, if Turk Redby were not already dead he knew what he would do. Every one in the party had known Dean Potter, Simon Dawes and Joe Crampton, and it was with solemn faces, and emotions of the deepest regret, that they looked upon all that remained of the ill-fated trio.

It was decided that the skeletons should be left upon the horses, and taken to Fort Binkley just as they were found.

So, the next morning our friends were up bright and early, ready for the homeward journey, and mounting their own animals, and leading those of the silent riders, they turned their backs on the cañon camp. They left the breaks by a different route from that by which they had entered, having discovered a pass through which the skeletons had gained access to the gorge on the preceding night. It was a strange looking party indeed that came out upon the open prairie that morning, and the trapper indulged in a grim smile as he remarked that nothing was to be apprehended from Indians while they were attended by such a body-guard.

Once upon the plains, Solomon, the Indian dwarf, was set free, and allowed to depart in peace; but he was particularly warned never to show himself at Fort Binkley again, until he had grown tired of life, as that would be the only occasion upon which they could render him a service.

Solomon went his way, and was never seen nor heard of again by any of the other characters in this drama.

When the party reached the fort it was greeted by shouts of welcome, and exclamations of delight, horror, wonder and awe. Great crowds gathered around the Specter Riders, when told that they were their missing friends, and gazed at them sorrowfully, making numerous inquiries, and indulging in murmurs of indignation.

The remains of the murdered men were buried in one grave, on a beautiful spot which had been consecrated by the burial of the few who had gone before.

Colonel Howarth resumed his command, and one day he summoned Edward Westlake into his presence, and made him an offer of a captain's commission as a partial reward, he said, of the services rendered to himself and daughter. But Edward declined the honor with thanks, and modestly added that he desired a reward of another description entirely, to wit: the hand of Marian. The colonel laughed, and told him that was his already. The captaincy was then proffered to old Adam Griff, but he shook his head in his odd way, and said he "war willin' to do some scoutin' for the fort, whenever he was axed, and fightin', too, ef it

come to that, but he warn't goin' to tie himself thar—not he."

Edward and Marian have been married many years, though both are comparatively young as yet. The bright-eyed olive-branches growing up around them, are by no means calculated to lighten the domestic cares, but what is a household without children, and who could be selfish enough to prefer the coldness and loneliness of a fruitless union?

THE END.

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